

# Raven Squadron: Pandora Protocols

by Dark Gear

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Summary: They thought she was dead, but one man and a group thought to be gone have come back to save her, and help turn the tide against a nigh unstoppable threat. He isn't a soldier, or a pilot, and he fights without being seen.

## 1. The Past as The Future

(Author's Note: So to all who read this story, this is the continuation of Raven Squadron. I strongly suggest you read it before you read this one as you may not understand what is going on halfway. To the readers who have read this, I apologize but I need to create some backstory with the cast of characters now entering the stage, so there will be some past stuff happening again in a way. Legal rights still apply, don't own halo franchise or those characters, simply the ones I have created in both of these stories, Elena etc.)

**\*\*Raven Squadron: Pandora Protocols\*\***

**\*\*[1100 hours, February 9\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, Marin County]\*\***

The boy never knew what hit him. One minute he was with his parents checking on the action figures behind the store, hearing something about some girl wanting a fighter, and the next minute he had a gag in his mouth and a bag over his head as he was pulled out the back.

He was trying his best to scream and kick, desperately trying to fight back any way he could.

"Fucking hell, he's a tough one! Give him another shot damn it!" he could hear through the bag as the sound of the girl crying in the background for her fighter diminished to the sounds of a van opening its door. He felt a prick against his skin and he started to feel drowsy, but somehow, some way he knew if he fell asleep he'd wake up in a nightmare.

"That's two; if we give him another it could kill him! We need to get going now!" some guy said, but the boy couldn't see. He was afraid as he was lugged into the van and the doors closed, with multiple hands pressing his legs and arms to the ground. Even with whatever it was they shot him up with, the six year old seemed to push through the effects somewhat, which surprised the men who had just kidnapped him.

"Guess they really want him for thisâ€¦" someone said. The boy's head felt hazy and his hearing seemed off. Someone pressed something down on his chest with their hand.

"No wonderâ€¦ check his heart rate. I've never seen any adult be able to do that" one voice said.

"Me eitherâ€¦ isn't that some sort of tachycardia arrhythmia?" another said.

"Yet he seems fine, feisty, but fine. Let's get him out of here pronto" someone said, a female voice. The boy felt the van start as he breathed heavily, trying to figure out what to do. He wanted his mother more than anything, and he didn't know where they were taking him.

They drove for what seemed like hours, until finally the van stopped and he could feel himself being hefted out of the van. He tried to struggle, but the arms were just too strong. He didn't stand a chance against adults restraining him.

"I believe he could in fact survive another shot my boy. It would make your lives a lot easier" he heard a british voice, a man.

"Hey, you want to kill him, that's your problem, we're just bringing him here per orders" the female voice growled.

"Oh my dear, I don't want to kill him. I'm hoping he may be part of my project alongside a few others. Were you able to observe the little girl?" the british voice asked.

"She's fine doctor. She's definitely capable from what we saw. What the hell with the boy though? He isn't interested in airplanes, he was looking at the action figures" one voice said.

"Sometimes the skills are what matters, not the enjoyment. Here, I'll give him the shot. Sleep well Sethâ€¦" he said as the boy felt another prick on his arm and he started to fall asleep. He fought it every step of the way.

"That's incredibleâ€¦ I've never seen anyone be able to burn through that amount of sedativesâ€¦ extraordinaryâ€¦" the british voice said as Seth continued to slowly struggle. He eventually calmed down as they carried him somewhere, unknown to him or his parents.

They seemed to walk up a flight of steps and into what felt like a cabin of some sort, and then turn. The air in the area changed and the sound of pressurization happened. It was almost like he was on a plane. They set him down in a chair and strapped him in, and he seemed to feel someone sit next to him and keeping an eye on him.

"Do you feel that?" someone said near them.

"Yeah, ignore it. This is why they want him" the female voice said.

"Butâ€¦ is he emitting that? I meanâ€¦ no human should be able to do that right?" the same voice asked.

"I said ignore it! It's probably the plane you idiot, not him." What were they talking about? Seth remembered some counselor at his school asking him questions, something to do with what he thinks about or the dreams he had. He had one dream involving waking up in his room, but it wasn't his room, someone else was living there. He seemed to see things that everyone told him were just him half asleep, and to ignore it. He never did.

"But didn't they do tests? I meanâ€¦ didn't he move a bed or something withâ€¦ with his mind?" a voice asked.

"That's bullshit and you know it. Humans can't do that, so stop reading those comic books. There was no concrete proof, now shut it" the female voice growled. Seth slowly fell asleep as the plane took off.

\*\*[Unknown time, February 9\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, unknown area]\*\*

Seth woke up to a white room with almost blinding lights around him. He squinted and looked around to see he was strapped to a bed with a mirror on the wall. He had no idea why he was there, but he wanted out. He tried to struggle but it seemed to be of little use until he tried to think clearly.

He slowly wiggled his left hand out of one strap by pushing his thumb as close to his palm as he could. It was somewhat uncomfortable, but he could get his hand through the wrist strap and then pulled at the Velcro holding his other arm down. He then removed the straps from his legs and hopped down from the bed.

He walked over to the mirror and looked into it, trying to see anyone on the other side. He had seen a one sided mirror before, and his eyes were good enough at such a young age to see a ghost of chairs behind it, but no one inside the other room.

Seth walked to the door with bare feet. His clothes were gone, where he didn't know, and he was wearing some sort of white pajamas. He tried to open the door but it was locked. He hung on the door, hoping his weight would break it in some form, but nothing happened. He didn't have anything else to do and he was worried he was being kidnapped like in the commercials. He never talked to strangers, so he didn't know how this could have happened.

Just as he was about to let go of the door handle, a man opened the door and walked in, but didn't see Seth hanging on the door still. He looked around and behind the bed just as Seth made a mad dash out of the room and down the hallway. An alarm went off almost immediately as he ran, and two guards with weird uniforms ran towards him. They were a lot faster than he was with his small legs, but he did his best, and slid through one of the guard's legs and continued

on.

"Stop him!" he heard as he continued running for all he was worth. He was breathing extremely hard, feeling his heart pounding in his chest as they chased him, and he could see someâ€¦ thing, floating by him and then land in front of him. It was some woman, but she was see through and had wings with a halo over her head. She put her hands out to try and stop him.

"Easy, calm down. No one is going to hurt you Seth. Don't worry" she seemed to say in the softest voice, so soothing. He didn't know what to do. The guards caught up and grabbed him, and he realized she was just stalling for them to get their hands around his legs and carry him back. He struggled and tried to kick, even bite, but they were too strong.

He could see doctors coming out of another hallway towards them, or he thought they were doctors, with people in uniforms that seemed to say ONI on them.

"Are you sure this was a good idea?" one of the doctors asked.

"Just do your job doctor, Dr. Wright wants the information for later use. Figure out if he's viable for it, and then move on" one of the ONI personnel growled.

"Where is he anyways?" one of the doctors asked as the guards carried the screaming and struggling boy back.

"Observing some girl in a toy store, look, keep your mind on this, stop worrying about what your superior is doing" the ONI officer said.

"But isn't he being watched for something else? Likeâ€¦ not you?" the doctor asked.

"I said keep focused!" the ONI officer barked. The doctor nodded and walked up to Seth as they pinned him to the bed in the white room.

"Now, this will only hurt a bit" he said as he pulled out a syringe and filled it up from a bottle. Seth hated needles, he was absolutely horrified by them. The only reason the first three sedatives had worked was he didn't know about what the pricks were. Now he did. He screamed and struggled harder as his heart raced faster and faster.

"Take a look doctorâ€¦ his heart rateâ€¦ this is incredibleâ€¦" one nurse said as the doctor moved towards the bed and aimed the needle at Seth's arm. He screamed as loud as he could, and then everything went black.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

"Aleph Six Niner Recon reporting in, they have him in there" a lone radio voice responded outside, of what range there was no clue.

"Understood, they shouldn't be playing with fire. ONI is gonna get burned this time" another voice said over the coms.

"Copy that. Expecting a show soon. Roll in welcome party?" the first voice asked.

"Negative, wait for-" the second voice was in the middle of saying just as the entire base that was in visual blew up, an energy ball completely enveloping the land.

"Son of a bitch!" the first voice screamed as it had a front row seat.

"As I said, they're gonna get burned" the second voice said as the ball dissipated, leaving a deep crater in the ground.

"Status, I want a sitrep yesterday" a third voice came onto the coms.

"ONI facility is a write off, no sign of personnel. Kid's got some powerâ€|" the first voice said as slowly rising from the side of the crater, a small figure covered in white clothes that were stained, was the boy. He seemed to be on auto pilot, stumbling through the area, which was definitely desert.

"It's not the kid that has power, it's his subconscious. Pseudoscience just got a one up on medicalâ€|" the third voice said sighing.

"What, are you saying this kid has psionic power?" the first voice asked.

"No, I'm not saying that. You're watching too many sci fi movies. His whole body is screwy. It looks right outside, but inside there are defects which could kill him but work in his favor in some ways. Didn't you read the file while you were observing?" the third voice asked as Seth stumbled a bit and fell, then slowly picked himself up.

"Yeahâ€| something about he having a spare pathway on his heart, tachycardia arrhythmia and bradycardia. Jesus, is it true the kid can reach 418 heart beats?" the first voice asked.

"That's what the doctors said the last checkup. Enough medical, the kid needs to get back to his family. Sneak in, nab him and get him back. Those ONI idiots think they can waltz in and pick up someone we've had our eyes on? Shit, they don't know who they're dealing withâ€| amateursâ€|" the third voice said.

"I'm on the deck. Go grab him" the second voice responded and there was a shuffle of movement heard.

\*\*[0800 hours, February 13\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, San Francisco General and Trauma]\*\*

Seth woke up slowly and looked around as he saw his parents sitting next to him.

"Hey there bucko! You gave us quite a scare there!" his father said enthusiastically.

"Oh my baby, I was so worried about you" his mother seemed try and

say as she cried and hugged his head to her chest.

"Mommy? Whatâ€¦" he muffled as she let go.

"Someone tried to kidnap you, but the police caught them. Don't worry, you're safe and sound" she said in between sobs as she cupped his small face with her hands.

"Butâ€¦ I was somewhereâ€¦ I don't remember muchâ€¦" he tried to say, trying to piece together the flashes of what he had seen. What had he seen? There was so little he could understand as to what he was subjected to.

"Yeah, the police said the kidnappers might have tried to drug you and they're playing havoc with your body right now, so you may not really understand what you saw son" his father said.

"I'm thirstyâ€¦" he whispered as his mother looked at his father.

"Phil, pour him a glass of water please" she whispered and he complied quickly and handed it to her. She held it for his mouth and he drank eagerly. He asked for another, and then another, drinking the whole water trough down.

"Wow, you really were thirsty" his mother looked surprised.

"They could have starved him Danielle, and he might be dehydrated. Look how many of those bags they put in him?" Phil said and pointed to the four saline bags laying empty in the trash.

"Isn't that a little much though?" she asked. Phil shrugged.

"Do you know medical stuff for kids? I just know the body works honey" he said and crossed his arms over his chest.

"The doctors said you'll be fine to leave after the police ask you a few questions" Phil said to Seth.

"I don't know what happened daddyâ€¦ I can't remember muchâ€¦" he said.

"That's probably for the better in all honesty. Think of it as a bad dream young man. Don't worry, it's all over" he said with a smile. Two police officers walked into the room as both of his parents stood up.

"Good morning ma'am, I'm detective Brogan and this is my partner detective Teshier. We'd like to ask your son a few questions if you don't mind" the first cop said.

"Yes, but, well, don't push him ok?" his mother asked.

"I assure you Mrs. Franklin, it's only a few questions. We do it with the utmost care rest assured" Brogan said. His mother turned and looked at Seth laying in the bed.

"Come on Danielle, they just need some information, he doesn't remember much, so it'll be quick" Phil told her.

"Alright, ok, do it" she nodded to the two detectives as they sat down.

"Hey there big guy, how old are you?" Brogan asked.

"Um, six" he said and put both of his hands up and showed it on his fingers.

"Big number! Wow! I just need to ask you a few questions ok? Are you fine with that?" he asked. Seth nodded.

"Ok. First question, did you see any of the bad guy's faces?" he asked. Seth tried to think. It was a blur, so quick as he felt the gag in his mouth and the black bag over his head. He shook his head softly.

"That's ok. Now, did you remember anything about what happened while they had you? A voice? A name?" Brogan asked him.

"Noâ€¦| sorryâ€¦|" he said softly.

"It's okay Seth, you're being very brave right now. It was all a bad dream then if you can't remember much right? Bad dreams get forgotten because they don't matter" Brogan said as he patted him on the hand. Seth nodded in agreement. Brogan smiled and winked.

"That's a good boy. Don't worry, we caught the guys who took you. They can't ever hurt you again" he told him as they both stood up and walked to his parents.

"There will be counseling available for him if he needs it obviously, but from the looks of it, he's a tough a little guy" Brogan told them.

"Yes, he's always tried to be that way, sinceâ€¦| well, his medical conditions and allâ€¦|" Danielle told him.

"Well, if he remembers anything, just give us a call, that's my number if he knows of anything" Brogan said as he pulled out a card and handed it to her.

"Alright, thank you, I will" she said as Phil put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. Brogan nodded to her and then looked at Seth.

"Take care little man" he waved and Seth waved back. His parents sat back down again and simply tried to comfort him. A doctor walked in and picked up the data pad on his bed.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Wallicks. Well there, how are you feeling today Seth?" he asked.

"Fine" he responded.

"Good to hear that. No Grogginess of any kind? No pain or dizziness?" Wallicks asked. Seth shook his head.

"Alright, well, I'm just gonna check your heart and your breathing and then everything should be good" he said and pulled on a medical glove and pressed it to Seth's chest. He just sat there as the doctor

checked his blood pressure, heart rate and breathing.

"Ok, well, you look fine and healthy little guy, you should be ok to go. If you feel anything in the future, don't hesitate, have your parents bring you in" he said smiling and got up. He shook hands with his father as a nurse came in and took off small EKG stickers from his chest and back. He hated them. They pulled really hard on his skin and they didn't feel good.

Once he had all of the connections taken off his body, the nurse moved to his arm and pulled at something he didn't know was there. Stuck inside his arm, was a catheter. The nurse slowly pulled it out with a piece of gauze over it and then placed it in a small metal bowl, then placed a band with a Spartan pictured on it.

"There, you're all set little man" the nurse said and patted him on the head. He giggled as the nurse walked off and his mother and father opened a bag.

"We brought some clothes along because they saidâ€¦ well, you were in some pajamasâ€¦ Sethâ€¦ did theyâ€¦ did they do anything to you? Downâ€¦ down there?" his mother asked.

"Hey, don't traumatize him further Danielle, the doctor already said there was nothing, so it's doubtful they did that to him" Phil said trying to stop the line of questioning.

"I'm just asking him Phillip! I need to make sure he's ok! So just please!" she said as she put a hand up towards him to stop him as she still looked at Seth.

"Did they sweetie?" she asked. He shook his head, not really knowing what she was talking about.

"Ok, that's good, that's very good. How about we get you into these clothes?" she asked as he nodded and slid out of the bed as she helped him take the medical gown off and put some superman underwear on and then a shirt and pants. She slid some socks onto his feet and then took a pair of what looked to be new shoes out of a box and put them on his feet, before tying the laces.

"There. Better?" she asked. He nodded and giggled as she poked his nose.

"Good. Let's go home" she took hold of his hand and walked him out of the medical room and towards the elevator while his father picked up the bag they brought.

As the doors closed, both officers were standing a distance down the hallway.

"We need them off his scent. Let the highers know he's above top secret classification. And get that Wright to realize he shouldn't be meddling in our interests" Brogan said.

"I swear, didn't know a kid could do thatâ€¦" Teshar whispered.

"A kid's subconscious is different from an adult, some chemical change the doctors said. His is just wired a bit differently, along with parts of his body. Let's just hope he lives long enough to use



thatâ€¦" Brogan responded.

"You mean to control that?" Tesher asked.

"As I said, there's a chemical change that happens, it's unavoidable. No, he'll stop doing that without help once he's through his teenage years. His body will try and figure out ways to respond, and we just have to figure out how to let it talk" Brogan said as he pulled a data pad from his pocket.

"So, it's not like the movies or games?" Tesher asked as nurses moved by.

"That's completely out there. No one could truly control their subconscious without help. We might be able to even the odds on that."

Both men walked away down the hall.

(Author's Note: So yeah, short first chapter, sorry that it is this way. If I gave too much info, it could destroy the mystique that is Seth. And before anyone starts saying stuff involving psionics, it technically isn't that out there, but from my previous stories, yeah those were out there. This has a far more controlled way of telling about it, just wait and see. Seth isn't a special super soldier. If anyone has read Robert Doherty's Psychic Warrior, then you may understand the next few chapters no problem, just a hint. Oh, and Seth really does not like needles apparentlyâ€¦)

## 2. GRID Active

\*\*[0900 hours, February 27\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, unknown location, SRI-2 DELTA]\*\*

Seth woke up quickly from the sound of his terminal. He had another dream again about his past. He hated when he had those. It wasn't that he was afraid when they happened, it was simply the fact he'd rather have a better dream about flying or swimming and breathing underwater, or some wet dream with two girls. Reliving things that happened in his past was boring. They always played the same way compared to other people reliving the past. His mind was strong enough to piece together each thing that happened.

He slid off his bed and padded to his terminal, his lean muscled body barely covered by a pair of boxer briefs. He turned the thing on and sat down.

"This is Seth" he said quietly. Whenever he didn't know who was talking to him after he woke up, he was always quiet and reserved, but when it was with friends and he was fully awake, he was far more open and joking.

"Seth, it's General Arling" he heard over the coms. General Arling was an Air Force fleet commander in the new fleet.

"Hey Cory, what's up" he broke into a smile, knowing a friend when he saw one.

"We have a problem, and I think the group you belong to could help.

The Secretary of Defense, James Rickenbacker, has asked for it specifically" Arling told him.

"Well, send the reports to my superior, I'm sorry but I don't take orders from him. You guys are military, we're agents, we don't do the same rank and file" Seth responded, sniffing somewhat as he cleared his nose.

"You still have that civilian rank of a four star General Seth, don't give me that" Arling chuckled.

"Only cause of that clause in my contract which I cannot discuss with you. It's to stop people from trying to control us, or butt into our territory like the little ONI kids. Plus, Rickenbacker doesn't control us, Metfield does" Seth growled. Richard Metfield was the Secretary of Security, a revision of Homeland Security from so long ago.

"Easy there killer, I know you guys and ONI have your differences" Arling said.

"Differences? Fuckers tried to kidnap me when I was a kid Cory! I got to live a fairly normal life BECAUSE of GRID! Immediately afterâ€¦| shit, I can't talk about this stuff with you, you know that" Seth said as he ran his fingers through his shorn close brown hair. He never wanted to grow it out because he was normally curly, and it tended to look weird. It also helped with not needing to brush after taking a shower or waking up, and staying hygienic in his pod.

"I understand. Look, I know I'm your liaison between Army and govies, but you guys are way tooâ€¦| I don't knowâ€¦|" Arling started.

"Spooky? Weird? Psycho? All of the above?" Seth chuckled.

"And that's why we rely on you guys for the big info gathering. ONI is good, but you guys find shit out we never thought possible. Which brings this request. I already brought it by your superior, and might I add you're damn close to taking his job" Arling chuckled.

"No I'm not, I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I had control of GRID. I'm under him because of what I do, not because I'm any better than some of the others he's grooming to replace him, which might I add are very capable. I'm friends with all of them, and I'd root them on if they got the chance. The ol man's got a while to go before he leaves anywaysâ€¦| I'm not thinking that far aheadâ€¦|" Seth said softly.

"I know he kept an eye on you when you were little, and I know he got you that job. Sorry for bringing it up, but let's get back to the subject. Take a look at this" Arling said and brought up a file. Seth read through it carefully.

"Brigadier General Elena Savona Esprit Gripenâ€¦| why does that name sound familiarâ€¦|" Seth said in thought as her file showed up.

"You went to school with her remember? Hard to believe you guys were practically sitting next to each other in class and you didn't know each other" Arling told him.

"Wait, the black haired girl? Yeah, she was cute but she was with that fullback, what's his name, Andy? Andy Birken" Seth said as he looked through the rest of the file.

"So you did like her" Arling chuckled.

"Any guy would have killed for a chance to be with her, but I was the odd duckling out of the line remember? Doubtful I'd get a chance. Huh, augments like me" he replied as he looked through the project that Elena was a part of.

"Yup, well, similar. I don't know what you have" Arling said.

"Good, cause otherwise you'd disappear pal, no offense it's just I can't be a file these days like her" Seth whispered. All agents of the GRID had their entire file erased. They were dead to the world until they deemed themselves viable for retirement. All went through secretive training, The Death Farm as they called it. They left their past lives behind and started new ones in GRID. They're families were told they were working away from the planet they came from, and that they were always busy.

Seth looked over the augments Elena had. "Ocular lens enhancements" he whispered to himself. He was given something similar, but it wasn't just lens insertion, they had replaced both of his eyes with full ocular implants. They looked just like his old eyes, but he was able to interface with his pod far more efficiently, and provided a clean HUD for any objectives or background information he needed. The rest of his augments were classified, though none of them were combat dubbed. He did notice she had a cortex scanner like he did though.

"Sheesh, Elena's got some improvements to that body of hers. Wait, what" Seth said as he read the bottom.

"Hey, she's dead. Why bring her up?" he asked.

"We have reason to believe she isn't dead, just MIA. We believe there is a slim chance you guys might be able to find her" Arling told him.

"Look, I know you guys think we're-" Seth started to say.

"You do remote viewing" Arling cut him. Seth was speechless.

"You know just knowing that can make you disappear" Seth said quietly. His job was a secret to everyone outside of GRID. The fact Arling knew about it might mean there was a leak.

"I know what you do because there are mission statements that have an unknown spotter verified but no name. It only shows on the objectives we knew you guys were helping with. I put two and two together Seth, no worries. You're guy's secrets are safe, and if they weren't, I'm sure I'd be one of the first to try and catch the leak. If you guys get into trouble, we get into trouble, and we cannot have that can we?" Arling told him.

"Understood Cory. So, what, you guys want us to find her for you?" Seth asked.

"That's precisely what we want. Sheâ€¦ she deserves to come home Seth. We hold some hope that she's still alive out there, and the last rescue team never found a trace. It's been over a year since she was gone" Arling told him. Seth brought up his own files and copied hers into one, hiding it. He then checked on the locations the rescue teams had searched.

"You checked up and down the Scutum Centaurus Armâ€¦ wait, Deliverance Colony? You guys nuggeted it?" Seth asked.

"How did youâ€¦ nevermind, you obviously have access to the files. Yes, five NOVA bombs were sent in to destroy a portal for a newâ€¦ raceâ€¦" Arling explained.

"Precursors" Seth said matter of factly.

"How did you-" Arling started.

"Who do you think got the information about them showing up in the first place Cory? It's our job to know" Seth told him.

"Alright, fine. Yes, Precursors. Colonel Gripen at the time stayed behind to keep the fighters off of the fleet's back while the bombs went off." Seth cocked his eyebrow.

"So she's dead" Seth said.

"We believe she might have made it out alive. There was a slip space drive installed into her fighter and-" Arling explained a few more things. Seth pulled up any video footage from the ship she was on, the Conundrum. He watched in amazement as the videos showed just how incredible she was with her fighter.

"So you guys found pieces, but no cockpit. Alright, we'll take a look, but don't expect miracles" Seth chuckled.

"You guys pull miracles out of your asses like diarrhea Seth, I find that doubtful" Arling laughed.

"Don't get your hopes too high, we might find the cockpit, but she might not beâ€¦ wellâ€¦ you knowâ€¦" Seth said softly. He remembered she had smiled at him a few times when they were in high school. She was always kind, and very talented.

"Hey, are you listening to me?" Arling asked.

"Sorry, thinking up a plan."

"I said we'd like to think she's still alive, but if she isn'tâ€¦ at least we can bring her back to rest in peaceâ€¦" Arling said softly and sighed.

"Who do we send the information to once we find out?" Seth asked.

"It's in the report. You'll be working with the Conundrum, the ship she worked off of." Seth cocked his eyebrow.

"Wait, I meant which person, not a ship. We send our own ships out there to do the dirty work Cory, even ONI prowlers tend to be tooâ€¦"

visibleâ€| Seth said as he had always gotten annoyed with ONI prowler captains stating how good they were with stealth, and meanwhile a GRID ship was always behind them, watching without so much as a peep on any frequency or being seen through any window. Secrecy was their middle name.

"This one wants to join inâ€| they feel they owe it to her, and most of the crew are her friends and brothers and sisters in arms" Arling told him.

"Fine, fine, we'll let the kids tag along for this one. I'll see what I can do. Seth out" he replied and cut the coms. He looked at the group picture shown in the hangar on board the Conundrum, with Andy and her father.

"So I was rightâ€| he was alive on that asteroidâ€| guess they took some of the info we sentâ€|" Seth whispered to himself.

He got up from his chair and took his boxer briefs off, and then got into his bathroom and took a shower. Visions of high school popped through his head as he washed his short hair and body.

"You probably made Andy sad girlâ€| oh wellâ€|" he whispered as he turned off the water and brushed his teeth and shaved, then put on a white t-shirt and white boxer briefs, and white cargo pants. He finished with white socks and white shoes. All white. It didn't matter what he wore, he'd be doing some work soon.

Seth walked out of his quarters and down the hall to a lift. The lift opened and an AI hologram popped up next to his head as he entered.

"Hey Riko" he said as the vision of a Goth girl stood there.

"Hey, I've got the pod warmed up for you, and they're waiting downstairs. Are we sure about this? Isn't this â€| you know, waste of resources? We have like a hundred other things to do with you, unknown amounts of insurgents to find, havoc to create, you know the drill" she said as she pulled up her holographic mesh top over her black bra.

"Got asked personally, guess we're helping. Besides, I sort of know the girl we're looking for. Old acquaintance. I owe it to her" he told her as the lift went down.

"You want to save her because you like her and you expect it to score some brownie points right?" Riko giggled.

"She's still engaged to Andy Birken Riko, it's not like I'd ever get that chance. Besides, my life isn't exactly a viable conversation topic to her. We live in different worlds now." Seth sighed and waited for the doors to open.

"Well, it's been a year and that Andy would eventually have to move on from mourning and find someone else. Hmmm, you know, I seem to have a local net record of his station, and oh my, he's being hit on by another woman, some Jessica Warren. Blonde, blue eyes, buxom, almost as tall as he is. She's a secretary. Very pretty" Riko goaded him.

"That better be false Riko, or I will personally knock him around for giving up on her" Seth growled as the doors opened and he walked out.

"Oh, standing up for her? Her knight in shining armor?" Riko chuckled.

"Nope, and I'm not a knight in shining armor. I'm a spook crammed into an ice box looking up people's dirty laundry. Princesses get with princes, not spies, and especially not a remote viewer" he told her as he walked into the lab.

The lab was a huge column like area with multiple tiers going up and catwalks seen above. A large reactor was sitting in the middle, with multiple glass rooms along the outside, each filled with terminals and consoles with researchers at them. There were more quarter-circle workstations around the reactor, and one very modified cryo pod just under it.

"Hello there Seth!" a doctor said as he walked up to him.

"Hey Dr. Montez, we got a request so I have to put the other things on hold for a few" he told him. Dr. Montez was a hispanic man in his late thirties wearing glasses and carrying multiple data pads. He was in charge of the team that watched Seth's vitals while in the pod. He trusted the doctor with his life.

"Oh that's alright, insurgents can wait when you have them on the run. What's this request?" he asked. Seth showed him a data pad.

"Ah, rescue, seems beneath us" he sighed.

"Yeah, I know how you feel, but it's somewhat personal as well. We're to walk a kiddie ship out to where she is, once I find her of course" he explained.

"When have you not found what you were looking for? Will we need to wind up the backup nutrient pods for this?" Dr. Montez asked. The way the cryo pod worked was Seth would get into the pod and be frozen, and the way his body was defective was actually a benefit, as the blood flow from his tachycardia arrhythmia and spare pathway allowed him to stay conscious and connect to his subconscious, allowing him to remote view. It also allowed him to manipulate things he saw through remote viewing, but at a cost of nutrients sapped from his body. The nanites flowing through his blood stream and the way the nutrients were absorbed helped to keep his body from any ice crystal damage from the cryo stasis. The manipulation of real objects was taxing on him though.

It was like going through a full cardio workout in less than a minute if he did anything strenuous like deflecting bullets or missiles to save a ship, and it stressed his heart each time. Eventually, if he did something too large, it could either kill him or shatter his mind. He was constantly thinking outside the box to not use up too much nutrients from his body. Whenever he was outside of the pod, he would eat as much food as most families by himself, and was constantly drinking electrolyte drinks. Sometimes, in the mornings, he had nutrient injections in his body after he did something extreme.

"Maybe, I don't know what the Conundrum might do. We have a ship tailing her right?" Seth asked as he saw the pod prepping.

"Yes, umâ€¦ Heavy 2-2. A Battleship. Do we need to keep an eye on our friends?" Dr. Montez asked.

"Just back up, just in case" Seth told him.

"You always like to be prepared don't you? Do we really need a ship of the line following another ship of the line?" Dr. Montez chuckled.

"In this case? Yes. Heavy 2-2 is the back breaker if anything tangles with them. She's designed for it." Seth walked to the pod and got in as two nurses removed his shoes and socks, and then removed the rest of his clothes. They still had not gotten rid of the need to remove clothing inside a cryo pod, as anything left on could cause freezer burn. They placed small electrodes all over his body and then put EKG tags on his chest.

"Blink once, now twice" one nurse asked as he did as he was told. They checked his eye sight and then closed the pod door. From the bottom up, the pod filled with neutral buoyancy liquid with a new nutrient solution built in. He felt himself slip away slowly as he went into cryo stasis.

"Can you hear us Seth?" Dr. Montez asked as he stood in one of the rooms off to the wall.

"\_Fine.\_" Seth was thinking outwards to the coms, heard from bone mics in Dr. Montez's ears. It was almost like he was an AI talking, finding ways to communicate without using his body.

"Alright, your body looks good, no problems on this side. Head out" Dr. Montez told him. Seth left his body in a spiritual jump in his mind, flying through rock and dirt to reach the surface of Earth, and then erupted out without a single change in wind or movement. He shot out and through the atmosphere, with no notice as he wasn't actually there, a presence that was still sitting in the pod deep underground. He flitted through multiple ships, checking their registration on his HUD. He soon found the Conundrum.

"\_Do they know we're helping them?" Seth said into Dr. Montez's mic.\_

"Yes, they're sending someone on board to act as a liaison for us. You'll still be able to speak to them through thatâ€¦ thing you doâ€¦" Dr. Montez chuckled.

"\_Voice projection. Yeah, I know. It gives me a headache after a bit of doing it though, you know that. Alright, who am I looking for?" Seth said.\_

He was already inside the ship, looking around from the bridge out, seeing Captain Dare walking and talking with a Sergeant, some Edward Buck from what popped up on his HUD.

"The new pods have been installed" Dare told Buck.

"Yeah, better than the coffins we used to ride down in, just wish they'd fix the damned air conditioning you know?" Buck told her.

"You complain about everything Eddy. Can't you just be happy about having something new for once?" Dare scoffed.

"I would be if every time we get something new something takes it away" he growled, and then softened as they both stood there.

"Yeahâ€¦ I know what you meanâ€¦" she said softly.

"Have we got any new information yet?" Buck asked.

"They're sending someone up to represent a specific agency helping us. The last rescue team didn't do so well, and this is a last chance. If it doesn't work, wellâ€¦ we really will have to let goâ€¦" Veronica told him.

"I tried to keep in touch with Andy after he went back down. Poor guy, he was a mess until one of his buddies tried to hook him up with some new girl. I don't know, I think it's too soon for him to break away from Elena just yet" Buck told her.

"He's gonna eventually have to move on. I mean, if he likes her, then, well, put one foot in front of the other. There's no guarantee we'll even find her, and even if we do, she mightâ€¦" Dare trailed off.

"Don't you dare say it Veronica. We'll find her, and we'll bring her back, and everything will be good as new, you'll see" he told her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, well, I hope these guys know what they're doing" she told him softly.

\_I've been at this for a while Captain. If she's out there, I'll find her, just like I find all those innies trying to kick our asses from behind. Andyâ€¦ you idiotâ€¦ I'm gonna have to have a talk with youâ€¦\_

"Am I interrupting something?" a man asked as he walked forward. He had black long hair pulled into a ponytail with a black full goatee. He seemed to have a face that looked Mongolian but lighter skin, and was wearing a black trench coat with a black turtleneck, and black cargo pants with black combat boots.

"I'm sorry, who are you? And what are you doing on my ship?" Captain Dare furrowed her brow at him.

"I am agent Dmitri Juneberivich. I am the liaison assigned for this mission" he told them.

"Agent Juneâ€¦" Buck tried to say.

"Just call me Dmitri please, most people tend to butcher my last name. Now, I have already settled in nicely to my quarters, shall we get a move on?" he asked.



"Hold on just a minute, I'd like to ask some questions" Veronica said as she turned around and crossed her arms over chest.

"You can ask all the questions you like, it doesn't mean I need to answer them Captain. You are aware of the secret networks act passed for agencies outside of military jurisdiction and simply governmental? Yes, well, understand we don't answer to you, you answer to us" Dmitri told her. She growled under her breath. She didn't like being talked down to.

"\_Dmitri, calm down. We're all friendly here" Seth spoke.\_

"Who the fuck was that?" Buck said and looked up.

"Cherry? Who was that?" Captain Dare asked as Dmitri smiled.

"I ain't know about some other AI Veronica. He be not on this ship, or elses I is known about im" Cherry said.

"\_I am and am not on the ship. This is one of those questions you just don't try and answer. Just understand I'm friendly and your scout right now" Seth told them.\_

"Ah my good man, I didn't know you were already here! I at least know I get to work with you this time. I'm glad to see you again, orâ€|hear you againâ€|" Dmitri chuckled.

"\_Like wise Dmitri. Alright, is the ship good to go? I have clear checks everywhere" Seth told them.\_

"How the hell do you know that?" Dare asked confused.

"\_I'm good at what I do Captain. Friendly, remember? Now, the question you should be asking is, are you crewmembers ready to go save one of their own?" Seth asked.\_

"We were ready a week ago, but we weren't allowed to leave port" Buck whispered and Veronica elbowed him.

"\_Then we can leave quickly. The more time we waste, the less time she has" Seth told them and kept a connection tag to Dmitri and Captain Dare to his mind, a bungee cord to pull him back quickly and to keep in contact like an AI would. He didn't need computer systems to see them though. \_

"We'll go when we know where to go" Dare growled.

"Ah, Captain, he did say try and be nice. We will endeavor to be cordial as well. A question might you ask would be why we were given this chance to assist you. Well, we are the best bet you have at finding your friend and lost pilot. If anyone can find her, it's Seth" Dmitri chuckled.

"So the disembodied voice is named Seth? Creepy" Buck said and shivered.

"\_You could always use my nickname" Seth told him and seemed to beam a smirk in his mind.\_

"What's that? Ghost like Elena was?" Buck asked. Seth chuckled in his

mind. Her nickname was Ghost. She always did sneak up on people.

"\_No, it's poltergeist" Seth told him.\_

"Whyâ€|" Dare trailed off.

"You really don't want to know. It's rather unsettling to see him do some things to protect others. Know that he can't do them all the time, and plan accordingly. Think of him as a game changer if you will Captain. Use everything you have available that you know of, and he will do what he can to assist. You would be surprised at what he can do being not here" Dmitri told her.

"This is above top secret isn't it?" Dare asked.

"I would have to agree Captain. You mustn't tell anyone about this. We weren't here. You never met us, the only thing you know is you will find Brigadier General Elena Gripen and bring her home. We'll see to that" Dmitri smiled, and it was actually a warm one compared to the condescending feel the previous ones had.

"Great, so I got to meet a real ghost and I can't tell a soul about it" Buck laughed.

"\_Would you prefer telling and I haunt your ass for the rest of your life?" Seth chuckled.\_

"No no! That's fine! I can keep a secret! I stick with her for crying out loud, I can do that!" Buck said looking around worried.

"Now, I must tell you, I would like to change what I said earlier. Most Captains tend to beâ€| pushy on their ships, and I agree it is yours. But we have authority here. I can answer some questions, but do not ask about who we are or what we can do. The questions you can ask are involving this mission, and not beyond, do you understand Captain Dare?" Dmitri asked. She nodded.

"That's just like how ONI works" she told him smugly.

"No, that's how we work, and we play the big kid games. Do you remember the United Rebel Front? General Howard Graves?" Dmitri asked.

"Yeah, he was one of the three in charge of it. He made a move against Spartans, took it personally when Spartans did a number on their operations" Dare said as Buck looked between the two.

"I'll give you a hint. Who do you think was able to dig up that information that he was one of the people to go after?" Dmitri smirked.

"No way, that was an ONI operative that got that, not you guys" Dare growled.

"We passed that along to ONI operative 462 so that we could catch even bigger fish. Did you notice the front had continued even after his death? And do you remember when it crumbled into small insurgent factions?" Dmitri told her.

"No wayâ€¦ impossibleâ€¦ you mean to tell meâ€¦ well, I guess you guys are good" Dare smiled but was fairly annoyed.

"It's simple math Captain. We've been at this longer than you have, since before ONI was even around. Ah, but there mustn't be a rivalry between us. Think of it as a threat scale. We handle the bigger stuff; you guys handle the little stuff. There is plenty to go around, and neither can contain it all. Are we even now?" he asked. Dare looked him up and down, and then sighed and nodded.

"Good. There should be peace while we perform this mission, I always enjoy that very much. Your roster is complete, shall we get a move on? By your orders for your ship of course" Dmitri smiled at her.

"We're ready" Dare said and walked to the bridge, with Buck and Dmitri in tow. Seth had already slipped out of the ship quickly, and was hovering in space like some all-powerful god. He was by far not all powerful though, and not even close to being omniscient.

Seth could see things that scanners and sensors couldn't even pick up, and normal eyes couldn't see in the darkness of space. It was like someone shined a light wherever he needed to, never needing night vision or thermal vision. He simply saw from his mind. If he could think of something being there, it would show. GRID still didn't quite understand how it worked, just that remote viewers, at least the ones as powerful as he was, could simply mind vision anything. It helped with warning of incoming attacks faster than a warning buoy or beacons for fleets. If a remote viewer was active, they could track it. The ultimate watch dog.

"Seth, are you still there?" Dmitri asked as Dare looked at him.

"\_Just checking the weather. Heavy 2-2 is following" Seth said into his bone mic.\_

"That's good. Do you have a view yet on where to go?" Dmitri asked. Seth suddenly shot high and away from the solar system, faster than anything physical could go. Gravity and space had no meaning for his mind. He watched the galaxy from afar, always in awe at its splendor. No words could explain what he could see, and only remote viewers ever got a chance to do it. Normal humans just couldn't understand the beauty he got to witness on so many occasions.

"\_Scutum Centaurus Arm right?" Seth asked.\_

"What?" Dare asked.

"\_I asked if Deliverance Colony was in that arm. Nevermind, I'll look it up myself" he growled and pulled up the file involving where Elena was last seen.\_

"How the hell does he know about thatâ€¦" Buck whispered to Dare.

"I thought the whole thing was classified, I don't knowâ€¦" she whispered back.

"\_Huh, asteroid belt. Five NOVA bombs? Jesus, overkill much?" Seth said.\_

"If you can read that file, you know what we went up against" Dare growled and narrowed her eyes.

"\_I also know that two would have worked just fine, or even one. Fiveâ€¦ you were ringing the admiral's doorbell after that weren't you? Oh wait, the admiral was there, nevermind. Anywaysâ€¦" Seth told them and looked around.\_

"Have you found anything or not? Please oh god say you haveâ€¦" Dare put aside her annoyance with being talked down to by a incorporeal voice that couldn't be connected to a body and just pushed all of her hope to the front of her mind.

"\_I thinkâ€¦" he said and opened a grid marker onto the galaxy.\_

GRID had unbeknownst to everyone placed stealth beacons and satellites everywhere they went, hidden in all directions to provide a network for information gathering. It also provided a hop point for remote viewers to try and focus quickly. He found a peculiar speck floating around a year ago that has had its trajectory move away from the Scutum Centaurus Arm and toward Carina Sagittarius Arm. He shot towards it quickly, only to find an asteroid. He was on the right track though.

He zoomed out quickly and moved to another, and another, faster than any satellite could do. He was moving as fast as his mind would allow, which was near instant. He stopped dead in his tracks as there, floating in space, was a cockpit. It was damaged and sparking still, surprising him as he noticed power was still flowing.

"\_Haha, good ol ion generatorsâ€¦" Seth chuckled.\_

"You found her?" Dare was in shock as Buck looked around in hope as the rest of the bridge crew turned around and heard.

"\_Think so. Lemme check. Knock knock" Seth said as he zoomed into the cockpit.\_

Sitting in the seat, was Elena. He could see through her visor at her beautiful face as it was covered in frost. She was in cryo stasis. He felt he was smiling in his mind. He got to see her again, and without Andy's arm draped over her shoulder. He had never been this close to her before. He had never used his remote viewing to peek at people in the shower or for personal reasons, it seemed always beneath him. If he wanted to see a woman naked, he'd just look at porn, which wasn't fulfilling. Despite enjoying being a remote viewer, he also missed feeling with his body.

Seth flipped around and looked at the control panels. Cryo stasis was active. Good. Transponders and all signal controls offline. Bad. No shields. Really bad.

"\_Yup, alive" Seth said as he heard from his connection everyone cheering from the good news.\_

"Alright, so where do we go?" Dare asked. A waypoint immediately showed up on a viewscreen. Dare cocked her eyebrow and looked at Dmitri smiling.

"He's good at what he does Captain. The trip should take a week at most. Good work Seth" Dmitri said to the air.

"\_Alright, my job is done. Gonna go eat now" Seth told them.\_

"Wait, you aren't sticking with us?" Dare asked. Buck looked confused.

"\_While you guys are in slip space? Fuck that. I get bored quickly. I wanna go see a baseball game too. I'll be back later no worries. I'm your guardian angel until she gets back home, AFTER you get there" Seth chuckled.\_

"Thanks Seth" Buck said to the air. No response.

"I believe that means he's disconnected Sergeant" Dmitri chuckled.

"Can't tell if that guy is listening or notâ€¦| Hey, is he an AI?" Buck asked.

"No, and don't ask any more questions about him please. First warning" Dmitri smiled again, but it was a "I'll stab you right here and now" smile. Buck shut up. He was a bad ass ODST, but he did not want to mess with a spook, especially one that ONI operatives told ghost stories about, and he didn't even know existed.

"Alright, spin up all drives, we're heading out" Dare said as the crew immediately woke up and did their duties. They were going. They were heading out to find a long lost pilot.

(Author's Note: I rewrote this chapter four times. I'm not kidding you, I couldn't figure out how to start this. So I skipped his past. It's all classified anyways, and it will pop up eventually. See? He's not some super psionic super hero. He's a guy in a pod that is the best forward observer known. Now things get interesting. Please review!)

### 3. Strict Taskmaster, Bored Poltergeist

\*\*[0800 hours, February 28\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ En Route to GRID Waypoint]\*\*

Buck opened the door to the gym to see Aldric lifting weights. He was the only Spartan still assigned to the ship after the fleet had returned, the others would be transferred to other ships, Renee going with John and Kelly and Fred heading to another. Aldric was temporarily in charge of Raven Squadron while the Lieutenant Colonel figured out what to do. Until there were set orders, all Spartans were still stationed on the ship.

"How long have you been at that?" Buck asked. Aldric put down his bar on the rack and got up. He looked at Buck with sweat pouring down his face.

"I don't know, just getting my mind off things" he said as he took a towel and wiped away the sweat.

"Hey, I got good news. Guess where we're going" Buck said as he looked excited.

"Noâ€¦ seriously? They found her?" his face lit up. She was coming home. He missed seeing her, dancing with her, talking to her about the squadron. He was sure the others would be happy as well.

"Yup, it's all kind of spooky though. You'll never believe how they did it." Buck looked around nervously and looked at the ceiling. Aldric thought he was going crazy.

"Are you alright?" Aldric asked.

"Me? Well, I'm just worried he's listening" Buck asked. Aldric really thought he had gone crazy.

"Um, Sergeant, there's no one else here, maybe you should go to the-" Aldric tried to say.

"Don't give me that crazy bullshit, I know what I heard and what Veronica heard as well. The whole bridge heard him. Some disembodied voice was sending us information about where Elena was." Buck looked at the ceiling hoping he wouldn't hear anything.

"Uhuh. You sure there wasn't a gas leak or something?" Aldric asked.

"I know what I heard! The guy's name is Seth, some weird mind thing it felt like, like those movies where that guy does stuff with his mind? You know" Buck tried to explain.

"No, I really don't. So, this Seth, he found her?" Aldric asked. Buck nodded.

"Halfway between two arms of the galaxy. He then gave us a waypoint and disappeared, saying he was going to see a baseball game. Can ghosts go see baseball games?" Buck asked thinking.

"I think he wasn't a ghost Sergeant, I think he was some special technology being used" Aldric tried to calm Buck down.

"Ah! He isn't an AI before you start thinking that! The agent whose on board told us that much! He's real and alive it seems, so wait, that makes him not a ghostâ€¦ how the hellâ€¦" Buck tried to wrap his mind around what he had gone through the other day.

"I think those questions are best not answered. He did what he did, and now we're on our way. That's all that matters" Aldric said and patted Buck on the shoulder and walked to the gym door.

"But it's just so weird you know? If we had guys like him during the Covenant War, then why didn't they do things like that to help us out?" Buck asked as he followed him.

"Probably because they weren't as advanced back then as they are now, or maybe they were busy with things we didn't see. Whatever they are or whoever they are, we soldiers don't know anything about them, and it's doubtful we should be asking those questions. Just push it from your mind and keep your head focused on getting Elena back safe and sound." Aldric walked towards the DFAC as Buck just stood

there.

"Rightâ€¦ focusedâ€¦" he whispered and walked in the opposite direction.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Roberts sat eating his food quietly as Jacobs sat next to him. He was fully recovered and had found out about Elena so long ago. Merricks sat with them as did Sarah.

"So who's good for the party?" Jacobs asked.

"What party?" Roberts asked.

"You know. The party for when Elena comes back. We're heading to pick her up now. The REMFs took pity on her and allowed a special supply cache for the cooks to make a cake. God it's gonna be good to have her back" Jacobs chuckled and popped a grape in his mouth.

"It willâ€¦ everyone has missed herâ€¦ it was boring when we went to Sangheilios without herâ€¦ didn't feel rightâ€¦" Sarah said softly.

"I agree. Without our squadron commander, it just feltâ€¦ wrongâ€¦" Merricks commented.

"Well it won't feel wrong anymore. Everything will be back to normal soon. We-" Roberts shut up as Aldric walked in and got in line for the food. Roberts nodded to him and he nodded back. They didn't see him as a Spartan anymore, he was a pilot just like them. Aldric picked up his food quickly and sat near them.

"Hey Commander" Roberts said and he nodded and took a bite from his sandwich.

"I've been meaning to tell you guys. Someone has been transferred to the ship recently with the rank of Colonel. Air Force. That could meanâ€¦" Aldric tried to tell them.

"That could mean that they're replacing her. Jesus, we're heading out to get her back and they want to replace her?" Jacobs gawked.

"She's a Brigadier General now Lieutenant, it's doubtful she'll be flying with us anymore. They tend to sit back and control things from the ship or back home. I just haven't met this new Colonel yet." Aldric picked up his drink and took a swig from it.

"Why don't they just promote you Commander? Put you in charge of it" Merricks asked.

"Because I'm navy providing assistance to this squadron. If I got promoted, I'd get my own ship, not a wing of fighters. Just hope this Colonel is decent to you guys" Aldric said as he looked at each of them. He had been their commanding officer for the past year, learned their little idiosyncrasies and what kind of personalities they had. He was used to them by now.

"Thanks Commander" Jacobs replied. Aldric nodded just as the doors opened.

"Officer on deck!" someone barked and they all stood up.

"At ease" a female voice said. Aldric whipped his head towards the voice. What he saw was a woman with fiery red hair, long with an almost porcelain face. She was stunning, and had an incredible body hidden in her uniform. On her chest, was the name Colonel Falken. She walked to the table they were sitting at.

"Ma'am" Roberts said.

"So you are Raven Squadron. Congratulations, I've been given priority to whip you all into shape and get you working again" she told them. Merricks stopped chewing.

"I'm sorry ma'am? We've been stationed at Earth since the-" Aldric tried to say.

"I am aware at where you've been stationed Commander. You haven't been using those top of the line fighters for anything but patrols. That is going to be rectified. Once this ship returns, we are to be transferred to the front lines against the Jiralhanae" Colonel Falken said in a boorish tone.

"But, ma'am, the Mk IIs would be best used for defense against-" Aldric tried to explain things to her.

"Do you think I don't know what they're capable of Commander? Do you think I cannot do my job? Are you questioning my orders?" she asked annoyed.

"No ma'am, justâ€¦ there is a threat that could come to Earth ma'am, we originally were told we had orders to-" Aldric was cut off yet another time.

"Those orders have been rescinded because I made it so. I already have authorization and I am in command now. You will follow my orders to the letter, do you understand me? I want drills in the sim pods against Jiralhanae ships for the rest of the trip" she told him and walked away towards a small room behind the DFAC, for high ranking officers.

"Shit she's a taskmasterâ€¦" Jacobs sighed and picked at his food.

"We have to handle her now? We can't pick Elena up soon enoughâ€¦ I can't wait until she knocks her down a pegâ€¦" Merricks growled.

"Just do your jobs Lieutenants, everything should be fine after. Maybe she's just worried we've been lax while stationed at Earth. We can show we're in tip top form, just you wait" Aldric told him.

"Yeah, sure thing Commander" Jacobs smiled and ate his food, now regaining his appetite.

\*\*[0800 hours, February 29\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ En Route to GRID Waypoint]\*\*



Aldric had woken up and gone to the gym early. He did a few sets and had taken a shower now, and eaten. The others were waking up and eating as well. He greeted each of the pilots warmly.

"Hey Aldric" Jacobs said as he walked in and grabbed his coffee. Aldric kept the rule that Elena had set by allowing them to call him by his name and not his rank. There was far more camaraderie in doing so. They all sat down at the same middle table they always sat at with Buck and the ODSs.

"Problems?" Buck asked.

"Yeah, a new Colonel" Merricks told him.

"Ouch, yeah, the redhead? She was barking orders to everyone who got in her way. Veronica spent a few minutes talking her down as she belayed some of the orders to her crew. Damn she's a bitch" Buck told him.

"She's got one hell of a bod though, she must think she has to be mean to make anyone take her seriously or something" Mickey commented.

"Or she could just be a bitch and just angry at the universe. Maybe she's bipolar" Dutch said and they all chuckled.

"Commander Aldric 4-102" they heard as standing in the doorway was Colonel Falken.

"Oh shit" Roberts whispered and drank his coffee quickly.

"Incoming, battlestations" Buck whispered as the ODSs slid down suddenly, away from her.

"Yes Colonel?" Aldric said as he stood up and saluted.

"I told you to get the squadron in the sim pods, and yet I don't see any report logs saying they did it yesterday. Did I not tell you to have them train for brute forces?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am, but it takes time to set up the sim configurations for those fights. They're ready to train today, just give them a moment to eat-" Aldric tried to explain, to get her to calm down enough to protect the squadron, Elena's squadron.

"It is 0800 hours. Most squadrons are already awake and performing their duties. The duty that I placed on you is barely even being thought of right now. Their moments to eat were at 0600 and 0700. So when exactly to you intend to follow my orders Commander?" she growled. She was talking down to a Spartan.

"Ma'am, they'll be there shortly, you have my word it'll be done with the report logs" he told her and stood at attention.

"I'll be expecting them in two hours for the first training sim" she told him and stormed off after giving him a glare with her emerald green eyes.

"Damn" sorry Aldric, we're eating quick" Jacobs said as he

ate his breakfast quickly.

"Thanksâ€¦ if you guys have any problems with her, bring them to me, I'll sort this out somehow. Finish your food quickly guys, that means you too Sarah. Sorry" he said. Sarah looked down at her food. She was always a slow eater. Her stomach got upset if she was forced to wolf her food down.

"Alrightâ€¦" she said softly and tried to eat quickly. Everyone looked at her with a bit of sadness as she finished her food as quickly as she could and stood up. They could hear her stomach protest at what she did, but she tried to stand up and put her tray away and soldier on.

All of the pilots walked to the sim room quickly and got into their pods. They activated the training session as Aldric kept watch over them and flew in his own pod.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

"This is your report log? This is what you just spent two hours doing? This is pathetic" Colonel Falken scoffed and dropped the data pad on her desk. She had specifically asked for an office on the ship. Elena had always been informal and allowed her squadron to talk to her in her quarters.

"Ma'am?" Aldric asked, confused.

"You have top of the line equipment and you can't even use it correctly? These scores are far too low for the amount of research and adaptation of forerunner technology into those fighters, and you can't even push them to their limits! What, not being on the ground cause you to slack off Spartan?" Colonel Falken snickered. Aldric was annoyed with the Spartan jab.

"Ma'am, the fighters were designed around a specific individual, Brigadier General Elena Gripen and â€¦" he tried to explain to her the fighter was meant for her to reach its limit, not for anyone else.

"I know what it was designed for Commander, and that long since dead pilot isn't here to say otherwise. That fighter is UNSC property, and it doesn't belong to her corpse. That means whoever is authorized to fly it should at least be able to control it efficiently, wouldn't you agree?" she glared at him. He felt the jab she used against Elena. She wasn't dead. He wanted to snap at her for disrespecting her name, but he was a lower rank.

"Iâ€¦ agree ma'am" he hesitated and finally spoke.

"Good, now, you will get those pilots so intimate with their fighters to the point they want to have children with them, do you understand? I want these scores doubled. Do it" she ordered him and he saluted and was dismissed. He walked out right into the pilots. Sarah was sitting down holding her stomach as Merricks rubbed her back.

"I'm sorryâ€¦ I justâ€¦ my stomach is upsetâ€¦" she said softly.

"Yeah, well, that might attribute to your score being the lowestâ€¦"

don't worry about it. I'll find some way of fixing this" Aldric told her. She looked up as her stomach made an odd sound.

"She wants us to go back and continue sim training" he told them.

"Shit, Sarah might not be able to do it. Is it possible to fake her score?" Jacobs asked.

"What? Jacobs, why would you ask that? No we can't fake her score" Aldric grumbled out, looking confused.

"If we don't find some way, she might be singled out next timeâ€¦ we can't let that happen. She'll chew her up and spit her out" Merricks said as Sarah just sat there, worried.

"Can't we talk to Captain Dare?" Roberts asked.

"No, they're on the same pay grade, as long as she doesn't interfere with the ship's duties she has power. Sarah, can you manage the sim pod again?" Aldric asked. She looked around and slowly nodded. Eating quickly made her nauseous and somewhat dizzy. Her stomach didn't agree with her and on one occasion she vomited on the ground. Elena, however, was there to help her and get her to her quarters. She never had to worry about eating quickly with her being there. Elena looked out for her squadron.

"So what are we gonna do?" Roberts asked.

"We head to the sim pod and try and make it through and improve" he responded. Merricks helped Sarah up as she held onto him and they headed back to the sim rooms to continue simulated responses to brute attacks.

\*\*[1200 hours, March 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ En Route to GRID Waypoint, two days in]\*\*

"Ah, I can feel you nearby Seth" Dmitri said as Dare flipped around, looking everywhere at the bridge.

"\_Just checking in to see your progress. Coms don't do it justice. Two days in, should be a safe ride. Just looking around, be back in a few" Seth said and zipped out of the bridge.\_

"Seth?" Dmitri asked. "\_Later" \_He responded. Dmitri sighed and shrugged to Dare.

Seth went on a stroll through the ship. He knew the systems were functional but he didn't have time to see the crew. He first went down to the hangars and saw the assortment of pelicans and Sabres as well as Super Long Sword IIs. As he floated through another bulkhead and reached hangar nine, he saw them. Black Blade Mk IIs, six of them.

\_Hmmm, five pilots and oneâ€¦ ohâ€¦ a new Colonel? Isn't that a bit presumptuous?\_ He thought to himself. He checked her file quickly and whistled in his mind. Definitely a looker, but her file showed aggressiveness towards subordinates.

\_Eh, Elena will sort her out hopefully.\_

He saw the maintenance crew moving around the new fighters and one red haired irish guy barking orders.

"Hey! Get those pumps out of the way! Damned siren from hell might walk in at any minute!" he yelled.

"Shit we never had this problem with any Colonel in the pastâ€¦| can't wait til she gets transferredâ€¦| we need Elena back pronto Zeks" one of the crew said as he picked up a hose and rolled it up.

"I hear ya boyo, but it won't happen for a few more weeks. Once we get her back, she has to go home remember? And then pass physical, and then and only then will she be getting the squadron back" Ezekiel explained.

Seth looked at the fighter with interest. The black armor looked similar to the armor used on GRID stealth ships.

\_Stealth design huh? Nice. Who made you I wonderâ€¦| Dr. Wrightâ€¦| wait a minuteâ€¦|\_

Seth thought for a moment. He had looked up who was in charge of the little kidnapping escapade when he was younger. Dr. Wright was a part of it. He checked the roster and found him in the R&D project room. He flew straight towards him, ready to throw some chairs around and drop a desk on the bastard like some deranged apparition.

Just as he reached the room and was ready to collapse it onto him, he realized just who Dr. Wright was. There, sitting in a swivel chair, was an old man. He was looking through data on his terminal along with a group picture sitting next to the terminal. Elena's group picture. He softened and floated there, unnoticeable as no one could perceive him except for Dmitri, who knew what to look for. Dr. Wright was in the picture as well, smiling right alongside Elena.

He focused and looked at him. Did he really want to take revenge? He technically hadn't done anything to him besides the kidnapping, and he wasn't there when he lit the base up. He floated over to the terminal and stared at it. Dr. Wright was typing up a new design to improve the fighters down below, a command model. It wasn't even in prototype phase yet it seemed. Seth sighed audibly and floated away, as Dr. Wright looked around confused.

"Cortana? Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Hmmmâ€¦| could be the friend Captain Dare was explaining about" she replied and flickered onto her holo dais. Seth looked right at her and chuckled.

"\_Guilty as charged" he responded.\_

"Impressive, no need for an audio transmission system of any kindâ€¦| I wonder if I could trace youâ€¦|" she said curious.

"\_I highly doubt that would be possible little lady, but by all means do your worst" he chuckled. AIs were so funny when they thought they had the upper hand, always superior until they find something that does things beyond their control.\_

Cortana tried to trace his connection but she found no link to the ship in slip space.

"Hmmmâ€¦ I was expectingâ€¦" she trailed off.

"\_A slip space buoy set up to transmit and then a cross link back to where I am? Please Cortana, do not insult my intelligence. That's not how I work" he chuckled.\_

Cortana crossed her arms over her chest and looked visibly irritated. "Fine, but I always figure it out" she smirked.

"\_Doubtful this time. I don't work in your world girl. Just accept some things just can't be explained to you."\_

"I'll take that as a challenge, so no, I decline if it's all the same to you" she remarked. Seth couldn't believe how arrogant some AIs could be once they figured they were intellectually superior. He ignored her and headed out of the room and towards the crew quarters. He saw Buck walking down a hallway as he was passing and came to a screeching halt.

\_Oh fuck it, might as well have a bit of fun.\_

Buck walked down the hallway and heard a small screech. He turned around and saw a metal bench that was against the wall had moved two feet out. He stared at it confused as he looked around and then heard a trash can at the corner of the hallway tip over.

"Who's there?" he asked.

\_The boogeyman. Oogey boogey boogey.\_

One of the lights turned off just over him and swung.

"Seth?" he asked out loud. Seth stifled a laugh in his mind and made an impression of a shadow moving across the ground towards him. Buck noticed it and started running.

"Seth! Knock it off!" he yelled and ran. Seth chased after him, knowing the shadow was burning through calories from his body as he kept it up following him. Buck ran to a lift and waited for it to come down and open its doors, as he pressed against the doors horrified by the shadow moving across the ground towards him. Just as it was about to touch him, the doors opened and he fell in. The doors quickly closed with two female marines standing there watching him.

\_Poltergeist 1, Hell Jumper 0.\_

"Seth, are you done having your fun?" Dr. Montez asked with amusement written on his face.

"\_Yeah, sorry, just bored. Checkup complete, they're all fine. Heavy 2-2 still following. There's a Colonel Falken that is causing some ruckus on board though. Might look into that later, or let Dmitri handle it. I'm coming out."\_

Seth slowly felt himself fade away from the ship and back to his own body. Coming back to his own mind was quick and harmless, almost like

waking from a dream. The pod drained its liquid and opened up as he slowly came around.

"How are you feeling?" one nurse asked.

"Hungry, like every time I come out" he replied as they helped him to a wheel chair and wiped him off with warm towels. They then took a thermal blanket and covered him to warm him up even more as he was shivering still. They put a cup of coffee in his hands as he felt the heat emit from the porcelain.

"So how much longer until they're there?" Dr. Montez asked.

"I'd say three days, and then another one to search the area where I told them. More than likely they won't fly directly to my waypoint and go near it, and then blunder around thinking I put it in the general area" Seth replied.

"Where did you place it by chance?" Dr. Montez asked.

"Right on top of her, just a bit above so if they do head exactly to the coordinates I gave, they won't run her over" he told him and sipped at the warm brew.

"BP looks good, breathing is coming back to full" one nurse said as they checked his body over.

"Please oh please oh please don't give me that-" he tried to say but was cut off.

"Eat this" a female nurse said and put a cup of what looked like jello turned into slime.

"Fuckâ€|" he cursed and stared at it.

"You have to eat it, it's highly nutritious" she told him and picked up the spoon. He grabbed it away from her and put it in the goo, then took a spoonful and slowly brought it to his mouth. He took a bite and screwed his face up in disgust.

"So is my foot, but you don't see me putting that into my mouth that often do you?" he told her. She cocked an eyebrow. "That was a joke. Ha ha. Oh fuck itâ€|" he said and quit while he was behind.

"Hey, they changed the flavor, like you asked" she told him annoyed.

"To what? Booger?" he asked as he swallowed the one spoonful and put the spoon back in the cup.

"Eat it all, and it isn't that bad" she growled.

"You haven't eaten this shit before or you wouldn't be saying that. Don't lie to me when I do the lying" he told her and stuck his tongue out.

"Fineâ€| I'll go check to see if their working on the newer stuff then, happy?" she asked.

"Yes, very much so, thank you for that. I hope to fucking god they

make those little caramel chewables. Those things rocked ass but weren't nutritionally large" Seth said as he gave the cup to another nurse. The nurse handed it back to him and glared.

"Fuckâ€|" he grumbled and ate the rest.

"You still need to take that until the chewables are a viable supplement. Take these" the female nurse, Jenny, told him as she put a cup of vitamins in his other hand. He threw them in his mouth, an assortment of different vitamins and minerals to replace anything he had lost while viewing. She handed him an electrolyte drink and he gulped it down eagerly. The taste of the drink was far better than the slime, tasting almost like old fashioned Gatorade. Even with the nutrient tanks producing absorbent materials his body could use to replenish itself in the pod, if he overused it his body could run down below dangerous levels, and require an emergency jettison for him to eat and recuperate.

The nurses put his underwear on and then his shirt and his pants, then the rest of his clothes. They weren't white this time, but an assortment of street clothes.

"Hey, how did the game go last time?" Dr. Montez asked.

"Didn't see a baseball game, it got cancelled for some such reason, so I went to see some fighting championship. Wanna come see this one? I got spare tickets for the fight. Hell, I think there'sâ€| ten I think. You guys wanna come too?" he asked, looking at the nurses.

"Well hell, you're the only thing we watch in here. Sure why not" Jenny chuckled as they all agreed.

"Sweet, championship is in two hours, if we hustle we can make it. I want a chili dog though, or two, maybe a dozenâ€|" Seth said as he got up from the wheelchair.

"Any more than three and you risk constipation the likes of which you've never seen" Jenny told him.

"Wait, what? Where did you hear that?" Seth asked with wide eyes.

"There's an enzyme that gets released when you eat too many of those things. You can literally die on the toilet" she told him. He cocked an eyebrow at her and looked at Dr. Montez. He nodded quickly.

"Wow. Death by constipation. That sounds painful" he said and shook his head. They all walked to their quarters to get ready for the show that would be starting soon.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Captain Dare sat at her table in the officer's room tired. She had just spent the past hour belaying multiple orders Colonel Falken had given some of her engineering crew involving improving their efficiency, and then having them immediately call her. She was going to have to have a talk with her, or she would go crazy.

"Seth! Are you there? Hello Seth!" she barked. No

response.

"Fuckâ€¦" she whispered.

"Never around when you need someone screwed with?" Dmitri asked. She looked up and sighed.

"How do you know when he's around?" she asked him as she ran her fingers through her hair.

"I've worked with him enough to sense him. It's difficult to explain, I simply know when he shows up. It's been a long lasting friendship. Let me guess, problems?" he asked.

"If Colonel Falken doesn't calm down, I'm gonna kill her before we get back, I can promise you that. Air Force is Air Force, Navy is Navy, Navy is not Air Force so she needs to shut the fuck up and worry about just her wing damn it" she growled.

"Hmmm, I'll try and keep an eye on her, as a good will gesture. If she's making trouble, then it is trouble for all of us" he smiled.

"Good, glad we're on the same page on this one. Don't do anything yet, but justâ€¦ keep an eye out" she told him and flopped her head down at her table and rolled her forehead around.

"I'll do what I can. Oh, one other thing. Your um, what's his name, the Sergeant, he's been a bitâ€¦ skittish lately" he told her. Veronica looked up from her position and seemed confused.

"Buck is not skittish. He shoots through the atmosphere in a metal box at mach 27 and then hits the ground running after it lands. He's handled brutes, elites, and hordes of grunts and jackals, as well as hunters. Why would you say that?" she asked. Dmitri smiled and opened the door. Outside in the distance was Buck sitting with his squad looking around in the DFAC, worried. Dare cocked her head and tried to figure out what was happening.

"He had said he had seen a bench move on its own and a trashcan tip. A light turned off and a shadow followed him down a hallway to the lift" Dmitri explained, definitely amused.

"Fuckâ€¦ Seth right?" she asked.

"Well, considering this ship is brand new, I can hardly guess it would be an actual apparition doing those things" he chuckled.

"Tell him to knock it off please. I have enough to worry about without having Buck looking over his back all the time" she growled and put her head down again.

"I'll let him know the next time he shows up" he replied and shook his head with a big grin on his face. Things were going to be interesting on the ship.

(Author's Note: So, considering what Seth can do, Buck may become the butt monkey temporarily, or maybe his entire squad, I haven't decided yet. As you can see, just a few movements makes Seth burn through precious vitamins and minerals in his body that he needs. Still, good



for a laugh for him, but later obviously he has to put his serious face on. Now if only he'd do that to a certain Colonelâ€¦|)

#### 4. Trickster

\*\*[0900 hours, March 3\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Paris]\*\*

Seth walked down the street towards the bistro in a yellow and black motorcycle jacket, black cargo pants that unzipped at the knee to turn into cargo shorts that were also made of fire hose material, and black workman's boots. He decided to wear fingerless grey gloves as well. The motorcycle he drove down the few streets he needed to after the pelican had dropped him off were cramped, so a smaller vehicle seemed to be the best solution.

He walked over to the bistro and slipped through the front door as a waiter came out. He walked up to a woman who smiled at him.

"Je voudrais un cafÃ© s'il vous plait" he told her with a grin. She smiled.

"Oui monsieur, seriez-vous rencontrer quelqu'un ici?" she asked.

"Oui je suis" he responded and she nodded and walked him to a table with an old man sitting already at it. He thanked her and sat down.

"I knew those language lessons would come in handy" the man chuckled.

"Always pays to not need a translator. She's getting me a coffee" he told him.

"I know, I speak French too remember?" the man grinned.

"Sorry sir, I didn't mean to-" Seth tried to apologize but the man just chuckled.

"Seth, what did I tell you last time? Sir doesn't work out here when its breakfast" he chuckled.

"Sorryâ€¦| Richard" he said hesitantly. Richard Metfield was sitting across from him. He was extremely good at what he did, and even made Margaret Parangosky back off. She was the scariest person in the UNSC, but she was just that, UNSC. Outside of that, was Richard's turf.

"Still doesn't sit well in your mouth huh? It gets easier. So, I read the reports you sent. Interesting aren't they?" he asked as a waitress put down both cups of coffee and a danish for Richard.

"All spruced up. Should be nice without any interference coming out" Seth told him, as they weren't talking about technology. Code language was a standard for them outside of a GRID building.

"Good, good, maybe we can clean company house soon enough" he said as he looked at a data pad with the current news.

"About what I'm doing now, Rich, I know I've been a bit lax on the other repairs, and if I can get a bit of-" Seth tried to say. Richard was always nice to him, but Seth was also scared shitless of him. If you were on his side, you were fine, but if you weren't, you found out quickly to change or disappear.

"I understand Seth, relax. I already accepted that little rescue you're doing, so no worries. Get to the other repairs when you can. There is still Thelma and Aaron working on them, so you should be fine. Besides, I believe there is more need of you repairing this than the other malfunctions" he told him. Seth looked confused.

"Sir? I mean, Richard, I don't quite understand. I thought some of the maintenance we needed to do involved the very large bugs we've been finding, out there" he replied, meaning the insurgent leadership now teaming up with Kig-Yar and pirates.

"Now we have a somewhat larger problem. Contractors" Metfield told him, and his real meaning was a new alien race.

"Ah. Those. Yes, I can agree on that. So, what, I have to go help the secretary fix any typos?" Seth asked, and his real meaning was to assist Elena once they retrieved her.

"She may need more help than an observant eye over her shoulder. You might need to type up some things for her." Seth knew exactly what that meant. He was needed to physically assist in any problems she came up against. He didn't just move benches around and turn lights off. He could if he used enough energy be able to crush a pelican, or starship like a tin can. He had only done it once in the past, and he had to be jettisoned out almost right after because of how much energy his body burned through to produce the effect. It still made a lasting impression though on the pirate fleet. He forever afterwards devised other ways of producing similar effects without almost killing himself, similar to Elena.

Seth had an IQ of 200, and was the lead remote viewer in GRID. If he couldn't get it done, no one could. He just had to do it much more carefully than a pilot or a soldier.

"Sure thing Richâ€¦ um, are there going to be funds available for the trip?" Seth asked, meaning would there be any resources devoted to the actions he would be taking.

"You have a black card Dr. Franklin, use it wisely for the company" Metfield told him. He knew. Black card was an unlimited expenditure of technology. If he needed it to get the job done, it was his. He prided himself on being able to use the minimum required to do what he needed. At one point in the past, he remembered someone wanted to use a Shiva nuke directly on top of an insurgent base. He instead had transported a chemical bomb through a make shift slip space jump right into the bunker. All occupants were killed, building was intact. And he spent the rest of the day with a minor headache, as the calculations of moving the bomb unnoticed through the small slip space portal made him concentrate extremely hard. His brain literally hurt from the effect. The cost for the entire action was miniscule compared to the nuke, and they had valuable intel once the chemicals dissipated and troops went in to collect data and bodies.

He had also learned he could open a slip space portal from a nearby slip space drive and transport something through it to where he was remote viewing on that day. Opened up a whole new way to take out insurgents when he could literally transport pelicans inside a base so troops could infiltrate quicker.

"You still have that doctorate right?" Metfield asked. He already knew, he just wanted to make sure Seth remembered what he was taught.

"Which one, Phasic Quantum Physics, Quantum Physics, Molecular Physics, etcâ€¦ or that special one?" Seth asked.

"The special one" Metfield grinned.

"Oh, that one. Yeah, the hobby" he replied. He was referring to Neural Physics. It was still in theory, and no concrete effects had been played with. They had always hoped Seth would eventually be able to do it in his life time. There were a few things happening with it, but nothing especially noteworthy, specifically the effects different frequencies had from some special energy transmissions had on remote viewers or others minds.

"You make it sound so informal Seth. That's definitely something to be proud of having a doctorate in. I'm sure it should do you a world of good in the future" he told him. That meant it may soon not be just on paper and actually viable. Seth furrowed his eyebrows and looked at his coffee. It could already be in prototype phase for all he knew, whatever they were building.

"You mean, it's going to be in the cards?" he asked.

"Well, we have reason to believe the contractors can do it, and we need to figure out a way to keep up with them if we are to do business" Metfield told him. That worried him. Neural Physics to him was the complicated stuff, something that made most scientists scream in annoyance when they tried to wrap their heads around it. Even he, with a much better grasp of the use of it with his remote viewing capabilities, couldn't quite figure out how they did it. Only time would tell if his brain was capable of handling it, but that might be a long ways off. Every other physics based science was child's play to him.

"Hmm, I'll have to look into the classes for it" Seth told him. He didn't take classes, he was given the material and he figured it out for himself while on downtime outside the pod. He didn't stop until he knew what an equation meant or how something worked. And it was all very easy for him to do it with his abilities and with the countless AIs in the base he was in. It didn't mean he was the smartest man of the century though. It was simply his different view of his surroundings that allowed him to see what others didn't, like Dr. Halsey, or Dr. Wright.

"Oh, and when you get a chance, could you look into a minor annoyance while you're out there helping her? There are actually a few if you don't mind. They're just in the direct vicinity. The rest of your list can wait until later" Metfield told him. That was the green light. He drank the last of his coffee and got up, and Seth got up and shook his hand.

"My wife asked if you have finished that book she gave you last Christmas" he chuckled.

"Um, no offense to her Rich, but you know I hate spy novels" Seth told him wincing. He laughed.

"I knew it was a bad idea, and I told her. I'll let her know you read those sci-fi novels instead" he told him with a warm smile on his face.

"The ones with the space marine running around killing stuff, yeah, more action and horror than the spy wannabes. The spy novels are always so inaccurate" Seth chuckled.

"You and I both know that. Have a good rest of the day" Metfield said and patted him on the shoulder and paid for the coffees and Danish and walked off. Seth sat back down to finish his coffee and chuckled to himself.

\*\*[1342 hours, March 5\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ En Route to GRID Waypoint, 1 hour connection]\*\*

"Again!" Colonel Falken barked as Sarah did another training sim. The others had gone through so many training sims each day that they were getting tired of it. The same missions over and over again until each score was flawless. Nothing was ever good enough for the Colonel.

"Ma'am, she needs to rest, you can't just-" Aldric tried to stop the order.

"What she needs to do is not flop around expecting others to carry her through the missions Commander. She needs to grow up and realize she can't rely on everyone else to hold her hand" Colonel Falken barked at Aldric. He was about to say something but thought better of it. Sarah was being attacked, but not by brutes. By her own superior. It contradicted everything Elena had done to help her come out of her shell.

"I don't feel so goodâ€¦" Sarah said softly.

"I said again Lieutenant!" Colonel Falken ordered. Sarah looked like she was going to pass out.

"She doesn't look good. Hang on" Aldric brushed past Colonel Falken and sat next to the pod Sarah was in. She seemed to be sweating and her eye lids were flickering.

"She needs to get out of this thing right now" he said and turned the sim pod off.

"Oh, is her tummy upset? I'm sorry, let's just let the brutes know she can't fight because she ate something that didn't agree with her!" Colonel Falken yelled sarcastically.

"Colonel, she's sick, any officer could tell you that. She's going to the medical ward right now" he growled at her and had a look in his eyes telling her he would attack her in a heartbeat if she got in the way. She glared as Aldric picked Sarah up in his arms and rushed her

out of the room and down the hall, Roberts and the other following.

They reached the medical ward and the nurses helped her into a bed.

"What happened?" the doctor on duty asked.

"She was in the sim pod and she's been doing it for a while, the past week in training. She's sweating and not responding well" he told the doctor. He leaned over her and pulled out a pen light and shined it into her eyes, and then checked her heart rate and her breathing.

"Yup, her stomach is reacting" the doctor told him.

"Great, now the Colonel is going to come down on us even harder" Jacobs sighed.

"No she isn't, Lieutenant Sarah Reist has an immediate ingestion tolerance problem. It's in her medical records. If she eats anything too quickly, and in too much of an amount, her immune system considers her trying to poison herself and releases symptoms to fight off something similar to the flu. It thinks she's sick. It's called Wellen's Syndrome, and it's considered an auto-immune deficiency. Her own immune system is trying to interrogate her digestive system, and it's too strict if she eats quickly" he told them. Roberts and Jacobs gawked and looked at each other.

"Holy shit, no wonder she ate slowly and chose different things each time at meal time. Fuck, she's been poisoning herself this entire time?" Jacobs asked, worried if Sarah would be fine.

"Well, I thought her squadron knew about this? Didn't you all? Colonel Elena Gripen knew about it the first day and accepted it right off the bat. How many days has she been eating to produce these effects?" the doctor asked. They all looked at each other.

"Four or five days?" Aldric told him. The doctor sighed.

"Alright, she's going to be admitted here for a day or so. Who's in charge of your squadron? Commander, I thought you were taking care of them? Why would you be so reckless towards her?" the doctor asked frowning.

"It isn't me; it's that damned new Colonel Falken in charge. She's been extremely hard on Sarah" Aldric grumbled.

"Oh, her. She needs to realize if she pushes her too far, she can snap. Sarah is a special case. If she suffers psychological trauma beyond the norm, she just doesn't care anymore and freezes up, like in a fetal position. The only way she has come out of that was to provide a stimulus to get her to want to react. Colonel Gripen had found that stimulus on a constant basis to make sure she didn't reach that stress level" the doctor told them. They missed Elena even more now.

"Well that will be rectified soon enough. Please keep me updated on her condition doctor, I mean me specifically. I doubt the Colonel would care" Aldric told him. He nodded and walked after the nurses

who wheeled Sarah into a medical room.

"Fuck, poor Sarahâ€¦ that damned bitch pushed her too far. This is getting out of hand, we need to tell Captain Dare about this" Jacobs said.

"No, not just yet. While it is a medical condition Colonel Falken should have recognized from Sarah's file, she isn't exactly doing anything wrong but push us. It will be ignored" Aldric told him.

"And then what? We wait until the fucking bitch kills Sarah in some form because she can't cope with the shit that flies at us more than any other squadron? Look at what we do Aldric! We fight aliens that can easily kick our asses nine ways from Sunday, and she expects us to all cope and be better than everyone out there simply because of what our fighters have the possibility to do. Now, she wants us to fight brutes, which are below the new threat that's shown up. How the hell can she be so blind and a hypocrite?" Roberts growled.

"David, I know, alright I know, but this isn't the way to go about it. Let me figure this out" Aldric told him.

"Well figure it out soon, cause I can't stand the thought of Sarah being forced into the medical ward because of friendly fire. She doesn't deserve this" Roberts told him and the Lieutenants walked out of the medical bay. Aldric sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

The ship decelerated out of slip space and came to a slow drift. They were in a nebula of some kind, with multiple blue stars in the distance. They had come out a good distance from the waypoint, worried that if they came out on top of it they would hit the cockpit and the occupant inside.

"Scan for debris" Dare ordered. Her sensors operations officer checked the surrounding area as the weapons officers scanned their surroundings.

"I have a pingâ€¦ it's friendly" he almost laughed and looked up at her. Everyone sighed in relief. They found her.

"Ma'am, I have another pingâ€¦ unknown. Triangulating" the officer said as he checked. Cherry tracked it quickly. In the distance, heading towards the cockpit, was something that made everyone's heart almost stop. Two Precursor destroyers, escorted by ten fighters.

"Oh dear godâ€¦ they found her tooâ€¦ what the hell do they want with her though" Captain Dare almost whispered.

"I would take a guess as to either finish her off after all this time or capture her and interrogate her for information" Dmitri responded.

"Either way, we can't let that happen. Shields up!" she ordered and the officers scrambled to their duties.

"This is the Captain speaking. Hostile ships have been detected. All

personnel to their battlestations. I repeat, all personnel to their battlestations" she said over the coms.

Aldric and the rest of the squadron ran to the changing room and got into their suits quickly, with him being loaded into his MJOLNIR by technicians. Colonel Falken walked in at a leisurely pace and got changed without a care in the world.

"I expect utmost precision out there. Failure is not an option" she warned to everyone. Aldric ran out as soon as he had his helmet and got into his fighter. He looked left and saw Sarah's just sitting there. She was out of commission temporarily. He was worried for her, but he had a duty to perform.

"Raven 4-1 launching" he said as he was loaded onto the mag rail and fired out, alongside Jacobs Roberts and Merricks. Colonel Falken came out behind them and immediately shot to the front. A squadron of Sabres led by Jones headed out as well, along with Super Long Sword IIs.

"Alright, all of you follow my lead, we'll suppress the destroyer's escort of fighters and then move on to the destroyer" Colonel Falken ordered.

"You haven't seen what that thing is capable of Colonel! Bad idea! We need to pull the fighters back and handle them separately while the \_Conundrum\_ keeps its distance and keeps the destroyers from hammering us to hell" Aldric told her.

"Are you disobeying my orders? Destroyers couldn't possibly be as strong as you are saying Commander, and they certainly don't have the anti-fighter capacity you seem toâ€¦" she trailed off as the thing powered its weapons and fired five beams towards them.

"Break!" she ordered and they flew in different directions. The fighters engaged the Precursor fighters as they shot towards each other, trading fire and dodging as best they could.

"Shit this is getting hairy out hereâ€¦" Jacobs grumbled as he flipped and headed away from two torpedoes as Roberts closed on the fighter tracking him. The destroyer went after the \_Conundrum\_ and ignored the fighter dog fight.

"Shit, we gotta head that thing off!" Jones yelled over the coms as he flipped around and tried to shoot off to help, but a Precursor fighter intercepted him and opened fire. He dodged and had two of his squadron assist. Colonel Falken headed towards one and fired one missile, just one, expecting it to just take the hit. It punched through the shields and drilled in, and then detonated. Damage could be seen, but it simply flipped around and aimed her.

"That thing should have been splashed by now!" she growled as it fired and she jinked left and then right.

"As we said! They're not like anything we've taken on before!" Aldric snapped as he rocketed up from his previous trajectory and flipped, firing backwards with his Vulcans and spraying the area, getting two fighters off his back.

"Shit shit shit, wish Sarah was here with usâ€¦" Merricks said as he

charged up his particle cannons against one of the fighters.

"Fuck that, I wish Elena was awake!" Jacobs yelled as he fired continuously at a fighter running away from him with his rail guns. The destroyer came right towards the \_Conundrum\_ and fired a volley of torpedoes.

"Brace for impact!" Dare yelled as they waited for the inevitable strike. She hoped against hope that the ship could at least survive the first salvo. The torpedoes flew straight towards them and started to slowly arc. They traveled around the ship and behind.

"No impact! what the hell!" one officer said as Dare looked confused. Dmitri grinned.

"He's here" he simply said.

\*\*[Music: Sick Puppies "You're Going Down"]\*\*

"\_Not happening" Seth growled.\_

The torpedoes flipped around the ship and headed right back towards the destroyer that fired them. The torpedoes arranged themselves to look like a happy face heading right at it before detonating against the shields and dropping them.

"Fuck yeah!" Jacobs cheered as he saw the explosions. The destroyer was caught completely off guard and didn't know what happened. It fired all of its beams at the carrier, and saw the beams reflect before they could even strike the shields.

"Son of bitch! Is that Seth doing that?" Aldric whispered to himself as the beams shot off into the void.

"\_Heavy 2-2, might wanna pitch in" Seth sent over the coms.\_

Immediately after he said it, Heavy 2-2 decloaked from its active camouflage.

"Fucking hell, we have another ship!" Jacobs said as his eyes went wide. The ship powered up its main cannon, a particle accelerator.

"I get the feeling he wants to say hello too!" Roberts said. Heavy 2-2 fired and punched clean through the ship while its shields were down, and just started carving through it from stem to stern.

"Confirmed kill" Dare's weapon officer told her as she watched the ship that she didn't even know was there help in the fight. They cheered.

"I'm not gonna turn down friendlies willing to assist. Fire the MACs at the second ship" she told them. They nodded and targeted the second destroyer.

"Alright, that knocks that one off, we still have these fighters to deal with" Aldric said as they slowly regrouped.



"\_Alrightâ€¦ let's see what happens when I make you're shields disappear..." Seth said to himself.\_

Aldric fired two missiles straight towards one of the fighters and was expecting to see them push through its shields. What he didn't expect was the shields just weren't there anymore. The missiles punched in and blew, but didn't take the fighter out. He opened up with his Vulcans and again expected the shields to stop the damage. Nothing blocked the rounds as they tore apart the fighter, the nanites chewing into the armor and digging towards the main systems.

"Confirmed kill!" he said over the coms as Jacobs headed towards two other fighters alongside four Super Long Sword IIs. Both fighters suddenly collided with each other as one of the engines on them blew. They spiraled out of control locked together, and then combined to try again.

"\_Oh, that was important, oops" Seth chuckled as he had pulled on what he saw was a power coupling. He pulled on another and another and watched the combined fighter sputter as its power flickered.\_

Merricks fired his particle cannons as Jones fired his medusas, and the next fighter had its shields fail as the medusas slammed into it and blew huge chunks out of it. Both continued with auto cannon fire and Vulcans.

"We have two crippled and two down already, six left fully functional" Roberts reported.

"I can see that!" Falken growled over the coms.

"Just warningâ€¦" Roberts whispered.

The destroyer flew over to the cockpit and sat just above it.

"What the hell is it doing? Oh noâ€¦" Dare said as she watched. A door opened up on the bottom and a tractor beam locked onto the cockpit.

"Shit, stop that ship!" she barked as MAC rounds flew towards it and struck its shields. Heavy 2-2 charged up its main cannon again as it fired four high energy lasers from nacelles on the sides. The lasers impacted the shields but didn't do enough damage. The destroyer fired its rear beams at Heavy 2-2 and at \_Conundrum\_. Both of their shields took the hits, but they didn't punch through.

"Shields already down to forty percent ma'am" an officer told her.

"Full power to shields and the MACs! Get that thing to stop!" Dare ordered. The \_Conundrum\_ fired everything it had towards the destroyer as it lifted the cockpit inside and closed the doors.

"Seth, might want to play with their slip space systems" Dmitri said to no one in particular.

"\_Already working on it" Seth replied.\_

The fighters were working to disengage as the destroyer looked like it was trying to leave.

"No no NO!" Aldric yelled as he shot towards them firing everything he had, some of it missing entirely as the fighters shot at the missiles and dodged what they could. They still took hits, but none of it really mattered.

"They're opening a portal" one officer softly said. The destroyer opened its slip space portal and headed towards it. The portal suddenly collapsed.

"What the hell?" Dare looked confused as the destroyer opened another portal, and another, as they continued collapsing.

"\_Wrong door. Wrong door again. Red light. Stop sign. Nope. Brick wall. Not valid. You cannot use that hole dickhead" Seth growled out as he closed each portal as quickly as he could.\_

Seth had done it before to stop insurgents from escaping, as he had learned to manipulate the coordinate and particle information in the area to just collapse the energy. He couldn't redirect it, but he could at least disperse it in a harmless way, temporarily acting as a catalyst that dropped the containment. He could also reopen them if they were fresh, and have ships tail one another.

"We have a chance! Go!" Dare ordered and all fighters charged straight towards the ship firing as they went. A wall of firepower struck the ship, but the shields contained all the damage.

\_What the hellâ€¦ something isâ€¦ wait a minuteâ€¦ that'sâ€¦ I can sense thatâ€¦ who's there?\_

Seth was looking around every chance he had as he closed the portals, draining himself in the process. Something was watching him. He suddenly felt a push and was knocked away from the destroyer. He felt a sharp pain. Something had actually attacked him, with their mind, or with technology, he didn't know.

"\_YEOUCH!" he yelled as he was flung back a good distance, the pain subsiding and his vision was literally blurred and distorted. He focused and cleared it and saw the ship move away.\_

The destroyer opened a final portal and shot through it.

"Fuck! God damn it!" Aldric yelled and took a deep breath. Everyone else was groaned and felt the pain as the destroyer carried off the cockpit. They had lost her again, and this time, potentially for good.

"Seth, what's wrong?" Dr. Montez asked as he saw a spike in his vitals back on Earth. They looked over readings that were coming back.

"\_No fucking clue. Something actually attacked me, struck me. I've never had that happen before. That was totally new. Any idea what it could be?" he asked, feeling his body screaming to get out of the pod. He had used a lot in that fight.\_

"Anotherâ€¦ could the Precursors have their own remote viewers?" Dr. Montez asked. Suddenly Seth realized why Metfield wanted him to brush up on Neural Physics. They used it, and probably knew how to counter him. They had never created a defense against any counter as they figured they would never need it. Not even other remote viewers could really harm each other. If anything, it felt like a warm tingle and they just brushed it off.

"\_I don't think it's a remote viewer on their part. I thinkâ€¦ I think they have defenses against meâ€¦" Seth told him.\_

"Then we need to figure out how to get past those defenses. The pod is building a report now and Riko is looking over it. You'll need to come out soon so you can rest. The nutrient pods are running low" Dr. Montez told him.

"\_Yeah, hang on" Seth replied.\_

He knew he had to get out of the pod soon, but he still needed to watch that ship.

"God, we were so close! Coordinate tracking right now! Cortana, did you get a fix on where they went?" Dare asked.

"Working on it ma'am, but I doubt they'll be there when we reach it. They'd most likely make multiple jumps. We might have lost them... herâ€¦" Cortana replied. Dare closed her eyes and brought her hand to her forehead. The bridge crew was silent. Just then, a waypoint showed up.

"Cortana" Dare asked and Cortana showed up on a holo dais.

"Not me, Cherry?" she asked.

"Isn't me girl. Someone justâ€¦ there's another" Cherry replied.

"\_Damn they're making a lot of jumps!" Seth said to everyone.\_

"Seth? You're doing that?" Dare asked astonished.

"\_Hitched a ride. Wow, they really do not want to be found! Just cause they knocked me off the first time doesn't mean I'm not holding onto their coat tails! Jesus, they're moving to the other side of the galaxy!" he told them.\_

"Great, it'll take us a month at least to get there, by thenâ€¦" Dare said as everyone listened.

"\_Nope, I'll open the last portal and you can ride it through the whole thing. Just ignore the other waypoints and head to the last one, don't stop for anything. With luck, you'll get to her. Hang on, they're stopping" Seth told him, now feeling the headache closing on him.\_

"That's the last jump? Are you sure?" Dare asked.

"\_I don't just disappear until the job is done Captain. I'm gonna help get her back, no matter what. You can count on me. I don't ever

give up. I'm the fucking AlkaCell Bunny" he told them.\_ \_He really needed to get out of the pod.\_

"Alright, with that portal open, we should reach it atâ€|" Dare looked at Cortana.

"My calculations show within two days" she replied.

"Two days Seth. We'll work up a plan during that time. Let HIGHCOM know" Dare said to the air.

"Sethâ€| thanks for tryingâ€|" Aldric said over the coms.

"Yeah Seth, good work" Dmitri said.

"\_Sorry to cut this short, but I have to leave. I'll see you guys when you get there. Seth out" he replied and immediately cut connection and faded.\_

The pod drained its fluid quickly and the door opened. Seth could barely keep his eyes open once he was conscious as he flopped on the ground and the nurses pulled him onto a bed. They dried him off and pushed a med hypo into his arm filled with a concoction of vitamins and nutrients and electrolytes. They pushed a catheter into a small socket that was cybernetically attached to his left arm. He hated needles, so this was the only way to not get one besides the med hypos. Syringes were still used, but med hypos were mostly used for quick nutrient injections or slow acting medications. Syringes were needed for the thicker stuff.

"His heart is racingâ€| Seth, can you hear us?" Jenny asked as she waved her medical glove over his chest.

"Yeahâ€| I can hear youâ€|" he said as they shoved four pills of chewable aspirin in his mouth.

"Your heart rate was over 200 in the pod, and that means you're at 550 outside. You barely go over 420 outside with the worst cases. What the hell happened?" she asked worriedly. She had been taking care of him for the past four years, and was the head nurse, just under authority to Dr. Montez. If she said something, the others did it to take care of him. Seth wanted his heart rate to be high in the pod, but it had to stay stable within a certain range. Too high, and it could burst or just stop, and his pacemaker and defibrillator wouldn't amount to anything. It surprised everyone that his could even survive the range it did, as 240 was literally at death's doorstep.

"Someone tapped me out there, or something, I'm not sure which yetâ€| Antonio, we need to work on something to stop thatâ€| or they're gonna rip me a new one when I go back thereâ€|" he said in between breathes. He was breathing heavy and sweating as his body was heating up quickly.

"We'll do what we can. I'll let the techs know what you're up against and alert Metfield. He'll want to know about that" Dr. Montez said as they covered him in ice packs quickly to compensate for the quick rise in his core temperature. He was heating up too quickly. Seth didn't let it on while talking to the \_Conundrum\_ crew, but the hit he took was like a gut punch, knocking the wind out and staggering

him. He couldn't let on that the Precursors could defend against him.

Seth was wheeled away towards the medical bay in the underground complex as Dr. Montez stayed behind.

"Riko, did you see that when we checked those readings?" he asked.

"No kidding right? A static frequency rebound energy transmission. It was like a bug zapper to Seth. We barely have one of those in prototype phase. It's barely even functional, let alone useable for what it's intended for" she replied.

"Neural Physics just got pushed to the foreground right nowâ€¦ let's hope we can make a defense for him or next time, it could kill himâ€¦" Dr. Montez said softly as he looked over the data recorded.

"Yeah. He really will be a poltergeist if he's struck again. I'll let the tech monkeys know and see if they can't come up with something to install in the pod in some form. You should really talk to Metfield now" Riko said and disappeared. Dr. Montez sat down and opened a coms. Today just turned terrible in less than an hour.

(Author's Note: The Precursors have a defense against Seth. To top it all off, they lost Elena, temporarily of course. To give anyone an idea, people can in fact reach the four hundreds in heart rate, I've seen it happen myself. 240 is actually very high for tachycardia arrhythmia and that's why it's considered a condition in real life. Anything over 200 is bad, 70 is standing up or fully awake, 80-100 is moving around, 120-150 is sprinting. 400+ is just insane. And he handles it on a daily basis.)

## 5. Elena's Spook in an Ice Box

\*\*[1023 hours, March 7\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Unknown Location, SRI-2 DELTA]\*\*

Seth woke with a start. He looked around to find wires running to EKG tags on his chest and small gel patches on his body. He realized they were nutrient band aids that was developed by the UEG centuries ago, and were slowly perfected. They provided vitamins and minerals but little else for up to three days before they were used up. He saw small pin pricks on parts of his skin that were most likely syringes with nutrient shots and hypo shots.

He felt groggy but he sat up on the bed. As soon as he did so, Riko showed up and looked behind her. Two nurses came in with Dr. Montez.

"Hey, you gave us a bit of scare there Seth. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Like I got hit by a freight train and lived to tell about it. I'm sore all over" he told them, and brought his left hand up to his face and rubbed it down.

"You've been out for almost two days. You burned through a lot that

time. Six saline bags, twelve shots and those vita bands." Seth looked at his body. He sighed.

"Well, you're vitals are stable right now, I'm guessing you're hungry and thirsty" Dr. Montez said as he picked up an electrolyte drink and handed it him with a fruit bar. Seth ripped the bar's wrapping off and nearly swallowed it whole, and then gulped down the drink.

"Easy there! Don't choke damn it, we just got you back up, we don't need you down again cause something got stuck in your throat" Jenny grumbled at him. He nodded as he took a gasp of air. The drink was almost gone.

"Alright, well, Metfield wants to talk to you involving a few things. Don't worry, the ship hasn't reached its destination yet, so we still have time" Dr. Montez explained. Seth looked up at him.

"What day is today?" he asked.

"March 7th, soâ€¦ two days, but we already had an email sent by Dmitri through special channels, they have another two hours before they exit slip space." Dr. Montez looked worried.

"Any update on getting a defense against what hit me?" he asked. Riko and the doctor looked at each other.

"Weâ€¦ well, the thing isâ€¦" Dr. Montez tried to say.

"I'm sorry Seth, they have reason to believeâ€¦ the defense they're working on needs to have more data before it can work. They believe they can get a white noise cancellation system for it, butâ€¦ you'd have to be hit again for it to understand what it's looking forâ€¦" Riko softly said.

Despite her Goth look, the AI was very sensitive, and was extremely vicious against outside interference to the people in the base. She had been known to find nosy AIs that were snooping around in GRID data files and caught them, then tore them apart code line by code line. She was a Vindicator class AI, and she was unrelenting. The most interesting part about her that Seth knew, was she didn't survive seven years. It was nine for her. She was the AI bouncer, and coupled with her brother Tachi, who was an Overseer class AI, they knew everything that happened in the base, and then some outside.

"Great, so I get to be shot at again. Wonderful. I thought this job involved that not happeningâ€¦ fine, so what do I have to do? There's gotta be other defenses right?" he asked.

"There are, but they couple together as layers. One is already being implemented. It will hide any notice others might have of your presenceâ€¦ which could mean Dmitri might not know you're there. You'd have to let your presence be known" Dr. Montez told him.

"So I'll be even more stealthy than I was before. Okâ€¦ that's one, and then there's the shields that will work once and only once I stop it by slamming my face into it againâ€¦ any others or is that all we got?" he asked. Dr. Montez sighed and Jenny looked at him.

"They're working on it, butâ€¦ we don't know just yet if a few other

things will function the way we need them to. They don't want to implement them until they know they won't kill you or separate you from your body. This is special stuff Seth, it has to be done right" he explained. Seth closed his eyes and rolled them. He still had a headache.

"Alright, well, I'll talk to the big cheese then and figure out what I'm doing" he replied in annoyance. A nurse handed him a small ear piece and he put it in his right ear, and then a screen showed up on the wall.

"Hello there Seth, good to see your awake and well. I had heard what happened to you and was worried" Metfield said on the screen with a smile.

"One hundred percent sir, I'm ready for another match" he replied, focusing on the screen as his headache continued. He couldn't give in to any side effects, he had a job to do.

"Good to hear that. I'm sorry about the events from two days ago. It appears one of our simulations had told us of that, but it wasn't considered viable" Metfield told him and looked down at a data pad on his desk.

"What simulation sir?" Seth asked curiously.

"I believe that they took her not to interrogate her, but to use her" he replied. Seth seemed even more confused.

"Wait, what? You mean as a pilot? I read the file sir, they use-" he tried to ask.

"No no no Seth, they do indeed use AIs in those fighters, I mean, how else would they merge together to fight even more effectively? The simulation showed they might try and assimilate her into their controls, like a cybernetic brain, using her skills and knowledge to allow the fighters to work more effectively. Almost a hive mind if you will. While this hasn't been proven yet, we believe that is one thing they might do." Seth was stunned. They'd really do that to her?

"They'd use her as a command node" Seth said to himself as he looked away from the viewscreen.

"Precisely. And if they do that, then our fight against them becomes that much harder. Could you imagine even ten of those things suddenly capable of moving like she does? They'd take out entire fleets with no losses. We'd be hard pressed to fend them off, and our only real defense would be sheer numbers which we don't have or you and the other remote viewers, and that again we cannot do because you are a valuable commodity that is extremely difficult to replace" Metfield told him. There was a compliment somewhere in there.

"So, we do what we were originally going to do then sir? Save her? But she's in that ship, we could try boarding it if we could figure out how to get a pelican inside without them blowing it away" he said.

"Which is why I'm having Aaron assist with that temporarily. He'll help with stealth of the pelican while you jam any sensors. That way,

the ship doesn't know we're coming and also won't attack you like I read in the reports. The infiltration team will sneak in and rescue General Gripen and get her out, and then you two will both create a secondary slip space jump for the \_Conundrum \_and Heavy 2-2. They'll blow their drives, but they'll get back here quickly. We can replace them after. See to the infiltration team Seth, and once they're in, slip inside with them while Aaron swaps to handle the jamming to keep the enemy from tracking the team. Good luck" Metfield said and the viewscreen went blank.

"Are you good to go like you said?" Jenny asked.

"Just a slight headache, I'll be fine" he told her.

"We can't give you any pain killers cause you know it dulls your return" another nurse, Eric, told him.

"I think I can manage without them this time. Once we get in and out, we're good. Standard smash and grab" he replied and got out of the medical bed and was put in a wheel chair. They wheeled him out and to the lift, and then down and to the lab. They laid him in the pod and took off the medical dress he was wearing. They gave him a few more fruit bars and another electrolyte drink which he easily inhaled. He felt better after he finished them.

"Now, remember, keep a good distance from the ship while jamming. Cortana and Cherry will be helping on that regard, but you'll be keeping visual off for them understand?" Riko asked as they closed the door, the EKG tags and electrodes still on his head and body.

"Copy" he responded as the pod filled with its fluid and he went into cryo sleep. He made the connection and was out in a flash.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

"Decelerating. We're coming in as cold as we can" the navigations officer said aboard the \_Conundrum. \_Dmitri wasn't there on the bridge. He was getting some ODS armor on. The ship slowly came out of slip space and sat there as Heavy 2-2 came in right behind them, and then cloaked.

"There it is, in the distance. Surprised it didn't see us come in" Dare said as she watched the view screen that Cortana and Cherry brought up.

"I wondered that myself" Cortana replied.

"\_That's cause we're masking your exit guys" Seth responded.\_

"Seth? You're back" Dare commented.

"\_With help. Look, we know she's in there, and we think we have a plan, but we need you to-" Seth started to explain.\_

"Get an infiltration team ready. They're already waiting in the hangar. One squad of ODSs and one squad Spartans. We have no idea what's in there, but anything more than that could tip them off. We're hoping they can't detect us inside their own ship" Dare said worriedly.



"\_I'll see to that. Are they ready to go right now? Stay as far outrange as possible, we won't be watching over you while this happens. I'd suggest you keep that Commander behind that flies a BB Mk II. You may need them if things getâ€¦ hairyâ€¦" he told her.\_

"What do you mean? Are you expecting trouble? Commander Aldric specifically requested to go" she asked.

"\_Only if they do what we're worried aboutâ€¦ don't ask, just, get your team out there. He's going? Shitâ€¦ alright, well, guess we'll be working overtime. A Stealth Pelican right? A Lohengrin?" he asked.\_

"Yes. It should be able to get there and back safely if they can figure out how to get through the shields" Dare told him.

"\_I'll do that too. Send them out now. We're watching" Seth told her.\_

"\_I'm here Seth. Where do you need me?" Aaron asked.\_

"\_Watch the Lohengrin and keep it stealthed. I have no idea what their sensors can pick up, but it's got to get there. I'll stop the ship from seeing it on my side, we work as a one two punch. Once it's through the shields, swap and jam the snot out of it while I go in. Sound?" Seth asked.\_

"\_Rock n Roll. Let's do this" Aaron said.\_

Seth felt so much better working with Aaron. He wasn't as strong as Seth in manipulating things, but he could keep up for the most part, and he was also a remote viewer, and a spare set of eyes outside was always good. Now they had two guardian angels watching over the carrier and the battleship, as well as the pelican.

The Lohengrin flew out of one hangar as they also saw the Black Blade Mk IIs slip out with it, five of them.

"You will do exactly as I tell you to everyone, do you understand?" Colonel Falken ordered.

"\_No, you will do exactly as \_\_I\_\_ tell them to, you understand? Black Ops, I have authority on this one. Shut your damned mouth and sit and look pretty, cause I will not take screw ups here" Seth growled suddenly to the whole squadron.\_

"Who the hell was that?" Jacobs looked around.

"That was Sethâ€¦ he's our local poltergeist coming to helpâ€¦ listen to what he says guys, he's a lot higher up on the food chain than we are" Aldric said over coms.

"Thank godâ€¦" Merricks replied.

The Lohengrin slid nearby the destroyer as the Precursor fighters patrolled the area. The Black Blades were sitting still with all stealth systems fully up.

"This reminds me of when we picked you up Jack" Aldric said. Seth couldn't look at the moment, but Jack was Elena's father. He must be piloting the pelican.

"I only hope you have the same luck at getting her out as you did me" he said softly.

"We will, trust me" Aldric replied. The Lohengrin sat there, waiting.

\_Alright. Open sesame.\_

Seth opened a hole in the shields effortlessly, but he could feel a slight tingle. They were just waiting for him to show up so they could blast him with that defense they had. He just needed to show he was there, which he didn't want to. He had to be extremely careful with what he did inside.

"\_Door is open Aaron, going in. Take over" Seth told him.\_

"\_Gotcha. Good luck man" he replied as Seth slipped in with the Lohengrin and they connected to the door that Elena's cockpit was taken into.\_

Seth slid up through the door and looked around. He couldn't see anything alive moving around. It looked dark, really dark, but it didn't matter to him with the mind vision. He suddenly saw it, the cockpit. The hatch was wide open, ripped open to be precise, and Elena wasn't inside.

He quickly looked around for a control panel of some sort. He slipped into the computer system, which wasn't very hard, and looked around. He wasn't an AI so he couldn't see data like they did, but he could at least try and comprehend different things as they passed by, basic things like "button does this" and "this turns on the alarm." Other than that, he couldn't hack access codes the same way Cortana could, just hit the switch and try and make the connection bypass the security. If he was lucky or could figure it out well enough, nothing bad happened. If something bad could happen, he burned some energy to knock out the alarms.

He found the button that opened the doors and hit it. No security at all. They must not expect any boarding craft. The Lohengrin flew in through the door and landed carefully. Seth made sure no sound went beyond the transport, but it was annoying to do all the thrusters. He literally felt like he was a spider plugging leaks with multiple arms, and if he didn't do it right a sound would slip out. It was like playing whack a mole.

The pelican turned off all engines and went silent. The RORO opened up and the squads slipped out. A HAMMER drone was left guarding the door. They were worried it could be heard down the hallways and they didn't know if Seth could keep it from being noticed.

"No contactsâ€¦ moving onâ€¦" Aldric said as Buck's ODSTs followed, as well as Fred, John, Tom and Ash. Kelly Linda and Lucy were still back on the ship.

\_It's a sausage fest in here.\_

They went down the hallway as silently as they could. They couldn't understand anything, as walls seemed to suddenly move down the hallway and a door would suddenly appear near them. It was like space didn't have much meaning inside.

"Fuckâ€¦ we're in a dyson sphere againâ€¦" Fred growled.

"Seriously? Do you know about it?" Aldric asked.

"Not as much as Dr. Halsey did, and that place was complicated enough. This placeâ€¦ it changes on its ownâ€¦" Fred told them as an opening showed up to their left, and they looked inside with their rifles ready. They didn't see anything alive inside, and motion trackers weren't showing anything around them.

"This place gives me the creeps" Mickey whispered as they aimed all around them as the walls continued moving around.

"Damn this is hard to watch our six! Every which way is an entrance to flank us!" Dutch growled. They continued moving forward very slowly, stopping every few feet and looking through an opening, hoping to see something involving Elena.

"Sethâ€¦ can you hear meâ€¦" Aldric whispered.

"\_I can hear youâ€¦ I'm going to talk through your coms because it doesn't push me very hardâ€¦ and I don't know if these guys canâ€¦ nevermind, don't worry about it, forget I said anything. I'm here" he said.\_

"Good, nothing outside to hear. Can you track Elena's neural lace?" Aldric asked as Buck moved up with Romeo. They looked into another room and saw a huge supply area, but then the door closed with a wall over it.

"\_Trying. Hang on. I have to be careful or you guys can be detected. I can already feel the sensors checking inside. Aaron, anything wrong outside?" Seth asked.\_

"\_Nothing yet. We're still clear. They haven't seen the \_Conundrum yet" he replied.\_

"\_Wellâ€¦ she'sâ€¦ upâ€¦ sorry, I don't have a map with me so she's just up" Seth told them.\_

"Alrightâ€¦ well, these rooms look like storage and someâ€¦ whoaâ€¦" Aldric suddenly stopped as one of the walls moved aside and inside they saw what they thought was an armory.

"Oh we need to grab some of thoseâ€¦" Buck whispered. The wall moved over the opening and another opening sprang up, this time with an assortment of crystals floating around.

"AIs? Computers? Lights?" Mickey asked everyone.

"I haven't the faintest clue guys" Aldric said as the wall moved back over the door opening.

"Alright, when that door opens again, we grab those weapons if at all possible and get them into the pelican. I know we're here for Elena,

but if we can get some of those, we might have an edge for future research" Aldric told them. They nodded as they waited. The door opened again and they all rushed inside quickly. The wall slipped over the opening and closed them off from the hallway.

"Any booby traps?" Aldric asked.

"None that I can detect" Mickey said as he scanned the whole room.

"That's not saying much Mickey. We're in an advanced alien ship" Dutch commented.

"Yeah, no kidding right? Best bet, grab one and see what happens" Mickey told them. Everyone stayed across the room as Aldric walked up to one odd looking rifle. He didn't know if it was a gun or a rocket launcher, but it had a lens on one side so it must have been an energy weapon. He looked at everyone and they nodded. He pulled out a drop shield attachment and latched it to his armor just in case.

Aldric pulled the rifle from the slot and waited for an alarm to go off or an explosion to occur. Nothing happened.

"Seth?" Aldric asked.

"\_Fucking hell that's one gigantically powerful explosive! It doesn't blow! It just vaporizes you!" Seth said astonished.\_

"What?" Aldric asked looking down at the small object just under the stock of the rifle slot.

"\_I just checked inside of it! It's some sort of incineration plasma mine! Much more sophisticated than anything the Covenant screwed with! I just took out the trigger system. Fuck that was close" Seth told him.\_

"Wow, um, do all of them have that?" he asked and looked at everyone. Aldric had nearly been vaporized by a trip mine.

Seth flew around the room and checked each rifle. Two others had one, and he marked them on everyone's HUD.

"\_Don't touch those. The others grab as many as you can."\_

Aldric and the other grabbed what they could and waited for the door to open. The wall slid away and just as they were about to run out, some huge monstrosity was standing there. It easily dwarfed them, almost twice the size of a hunter.

"Oh fuck" Buck said and aimed his rifle immediately.

"\_DON'T SHOOT!" Seth yelled into the coms.\_

Everyone held their fire as it walked in. It didn't seem to notice any of them as it looked around, and then walked back out.

"The fuck?" Romeo asked.

"\_I gave it a previous view in front of its eyes, well, what I

thought was its eyes, I kind of just covered his whole fucking head with a vision of everything being fine, before we came in. No missing weapons" Seth told them.\_

"Damn man, you are awesome" Mickey commented into his coms.

"\_Yeah, that felt awesome" Seth said as he felt the headache get worse.\_

"Alright, when the door opens again, we shoot back to the pelican" Aldric said. They waited for the door to open again, and when it did they shot out quickly and dropped off all their weapons.

"Can we use these?" Aldric asked.

"\_I haven't had a chance to see if their marked. I can't tell. Cortana!" Seth said.\_

"I'm here, Mickey, scan the weapons for me" Cortana asked as she watched from Aldric's helmet. Mickey walked to each one and scanned them.

"Mmmm, the larger ones are tagged, the smaller ones aren't, I'd guess for personal defense. Some of these are projectile though" she told them.

"Wow, projectiles from these guys? I don't want to know... probably a man portable rail rifle from the luck we haveâ€¦" Dutch grumbled.

"Let's head further in. Grab one of the pistols, or beamâ€¦ whatever, the side arms. We might be able to use them, and if they are resistant to our weapons, then these are backups" Aldric ordered. They all grabbed one each and continued out of the Lohengrin and to the walls again. The walls moved around more, and the opening for the crystals opened again, but nothing was inside. They all looked at each other and just shook their head.

"Damned thing must have taken them. Whatever, let's move forward" Aldric told them. The walls opened a door that headed further into the ship. The next hallway was much longer, and the walls didn't flit about as much.

"What do you think this place is?" Buck asked as he looked around. Seth slipped temporarily into one room to look around. His stealth field he was emitting around the team wouldn't fade for at least ten seconds of him being away from them, and the Lohengrin had its own stealth at the moment. He observed what he thought was a bedroom, but for much larger creatures, and the bed seemed sloped on one side. He transmitted a visual to the team from his view. It took a tiny bit of energy from him to do it, but it was better than talking the entire time and making his headache worse.

"Living quarters, maybe forâ€¦ hangar crews?" Dutch asked.

"Possible. We won't know until we head forward. At least we know we don't need this area." Aldric moved forward as the others watched his back. They checked each room as the doors didn't open, Seth sending a visual each time. Same thing. They moved around a corner and found

what they thought was a lift.

"How do we activate it?" Buck asked as Mickey jumped towards a panel too high for him.

"Probably the button panel there, but I don't see any buttons" he said as he continued to jump looking like an idiot.

"Cortana, can you do anything?" Aldric asked.

"Trying, hang on" she said and started her hack.

"Something is trying to track meâ€¦ that was fastâ€¦ I think I have itâ€¦ there! I'm out" Cortana said as she immediately pulled back.

"Jesus, they have AIs that can figure that out that fast?" Buck asked.

"Apparently, I don't know if it warned anyone though" she replied.

"\_He didn't, I would see that right now. He's gone back to doing what he was doing, but that was damned close" Seth told them.\_

"No kidding. We need to be extremely careful once we get inside" Cortana explained. Green lights winked on HUDs. The lift doors opened and they ran inside of the giant egg they were now standing in.

"So which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Mickey asked. Everyone groaned.

"The Spartan" Aldric replied.

"Spartans poop eggs? I'm just joking" Buck chuckled. Aldric looked at him through his visor and gave him a Spartan smile. Buck just laughed as they waited for the lift to go where it was going.

"Where did you send us exactly Cortana?" Aldric asked.

"I think I was able to grab a partial map, it's extremely primitive, but I have it. There's a medical area, a bridge, living quarters, weapons, hangars, andâ€¦ an experiment roomâ€¦" Cortana trailed off softly.

"Then we go there. We are going there right?" Aldric asked. Cortana acknowledged.

The lift doors opened as they all piled out, small little toy soldiers in a ship made for giants.

"I'll never look at action figures the same way again" Buck sighed. They slowly came up to a corner and looked around. They saw two Precursors walking up the hallway.

"Fuckâ€¦ Sethâ€¦" Aldric whispered.

"\_Working on it" he replied.\_

Seth watched them turn the corner as the team slapped themselves

against the wall, keeping as far away from them as possible. They were massive, with two feet and four limbs, they looked like they could easily snap a human in two, Spartan or ODST. They walked into the lift and headed down.

"Fuck that was closeâ€¦" Buck said as they continued on, and then came up to a door.

"That's it, that's the room!" Cortana told them.

"It's gonna be interesting getting her out of thereâ€¦" Aldric whispered. Cortana connected quickly and opened the door and then left the system just as fast, knowing now where to look. The female AI didn't even have time to get tracked. She was getting better. They ran inside and looked around. What they saw was horror. There were bodies of humans lying on tables, some cut open, others were floating in tanks.

"What theâ€¦" Mickey whispered as they looked at everything. One person had multiple tubes attached to his head with no legs, most likely blown off. Only two humans, a woman and a man were on the tables, both had their organs removed. They were both facing upwards with their eyes cut out, definitely dead.

"This is a shack of horrorsâ€¦ son of a bitch these guys have to payâ€¦" Buck growled.

"They're researching usâ€¦ looking at how our bodies workâ€¦ waitâ€¦ look at that.. they weren't alive guysâ€¦ there are woundsâ€¦ they didn't experiment on live people, these are corpsesâ€¦" Aldric explained as he pointed to small burn wounds on the sides of the woman's right breast and the man's head.

"They were still killed by these guys" Buck replied.

"We gotta find Elena right now, before they do something to herâ€¦" Aldric said and they ran to look at each table. They continued around a vat tank with a man floating in it covered in cybernetics. They saw a few brains with no body attached, and some sitting in an open skull. All had wires attached.

"Shit this is gets worse and worse" Fred said as they ran. They turned one corner in the room and saw a Precursor standing there. It seemed to be typing into a control panel. It then turned to leave. What they saw behind the control panel made all of them gasp.

Sitting inside the tube, was Elena. Her body was intact, with no cuts or dissection noticed, but she had tubes surrounding her, constricting her like snakes. She was entirely naked aside from the tubes and wires around her.

"Oh fuck, we need to get her out" Aldric growled as they ran to the control panel.

"Cortana, open the thing!" Aldric growled.

"Don't yell at me! I'm trying! Its got a frightening security system watching it" she said as she tip toed around in the systems. She activated the vacuum system and watched the fluids flow away from

inside the tank, as Elena was held suspended by the wires and tubes. The door opened and Aldric walked in slowly. She just hung, not moving. Her hair was matted around her, but she was breathing it looked, and each time she breathed some of the fluid came out of her mouth and nostrils.

"Help me get her down!" Aldric said and Buck and the others ran in to help pull at wires. They slowly worked her down and put her on the ground, limp.

"Elena, wake up, wake up it's us" Aldric said as he shook her gently. No response.

"She might be sedated. We should get her out of here ASAP" Fred said as John watched the exit.

Aldric pulled a thermal blanket from Buck's pack and wrapped her up.

"Hang in there Elena, we got you, we're getting you out of here, you don't have to worry, you're safe now" he whispered to her as he carried her out of the tank and back the way they came.

"\_Uh, guys, I think I know where those two are goingâ€¦ I tagged them just in caseâ€¦ they're heading towards the pelicanâ€¦" Seth warned.\_

"Oh greatâ€¦ we need to get out of here right now" Aldric said as they hoofed it away from the experiment room and around the corner.

"Cortana, get the lift again" Aldric asked. She acknowledged and worked her way into the systems again. Suddenly, like being caught red handed in the cookie jar, something grabbed her and pulled at her.

"Damn it! It's got me!" Cortana screamed as she made copies of herself and worked to get away from the AI. It was fast, shredding through the copies and coming right for her. She tried to disconnect but she wasn't as fast as the security AI. Seth shot in and sealed off access nodes on the system. Cortana got back scared out of her digital mind.

"Thanks Seth" she commented.

"\_That was fucked, seriously fucked. Um, guys, I can't stop this one. Alarm is definitely going off" Seth told them.\_

The lift came up and out walked a Precursor. He looked around as they raised their rifles to him.

"Seth? Shoot? No shoot?" Buck asked.

"\_Fuck it! Shoot him! Blow his brains out if you can!" Seth yelled.\_

All of the troops opened up on his head as they saw shields flare.

"Oh crap!" Mickey said as the shields slowly fell and it knew where



they were. It came towards them quickly as Seth thought quickly. He couldn't do something completely visible or they'd know he was there and activate the mind defense, and could potentially kill Aaron in the process.

"\_New guns are good! Use them!"\_ \_Seth yelled.\_

The team pulled out the pistols and started firing, as small rail rounds started flying from them and nearly knocking them back with each shot. The Rookie wasn't prepared for the first shot and nearly got thrown into Ash. The Precursor's shields flared and failed from the rail shots and his head suddenly exploded from the next attack.

"I love this gun" Buck said as he looked at the pistol he was carrying..

"\_Shut up and get in the fucking egg" Seth growled.\_

They all ran into the lift as Elena just hung in Aldric's arms, still not responding. The lift slowly dropped to the floor they needed and opened, and they all ran out as fast as they could. They had just gotten to the walls opening up as behind twenty Precursors came in and started to sweep the place.

"Oh fuck, they can't see us right?" Fred asked.

"\_Doing what I canâ€|" Seth growled.\_

The wall opened and they ran through, and shot to the Lohengrin as fast as they could. The RORO door closed as Aldric laid Elena down on the HAMMER drone carefully. She still wasn't responding.

"Strong sedativesâ€|" Dmitri whispered.

"Alright, we're a dot!" Jack yelled as the doors opened again and he charged up the engines. The Precursors ran through the wall door and towards them.

"MOVE!" Ash barked as Jack pulled up the dampers and shot right through the door outside, right as the Precursors opened fire towards the door, hoping to get a grazing shot considering they couldn't see anything. They didn't know if the weapons could tear through transport armor, but they didn't want to find out. The Lohengrin flew out as Seth opened the shields again and it hauled ass away. Seth followed quickly just as he felt the back blast of the mind defense turn on.

"\_Aaron! Move away!" he yelled.\_

"\_I'm already in front of you! I just felt that tingle, what was that?" he asked.\_

"\_Somethingâ€| that really hurtsâ€| ouchâ€|" Seth seemed to make a heavy breathing sound.\_

"\_You ok?" Aaron asked, worried.\_

"\_I'll be fine, it didn't give a full blast. We got what we came for, let's get to the ship" he replied.\_

The Lohengrin headed to the carrier as fighters started launching from the destroyer.

"Crap, we got contacts!" Jacobs replied.

"We need to intercept them!" Falken ordered.

"Negative! Fall back right now!" Dare yelled over the coms.

"This is my squadron Dare, I won't have you order them around!" Falken growled.

"The feeling is mutual for my ship Colonel! Now get your ass back here because this mission is under HIGHCOM rule and I have controlling authority here!" she barked. Falken scoffed and Raven Squadron shot back to the ship.

"What the fuck is she thinking?" Dare said to her bridge crew.

The squadron landed as Seth and Aaron jammed all sensors around it and Heavy 2-2, which was ready to charge up its particle accelerator again.

"We're heading out, taking a detour quick and then straight home" Dare ordered as slip space coordinates were registered and the drives spun up.

"3, 2, 1" the operator said as they shot into slip space and continued for an hour. Once the hour was up, they decelerated and chose another coordinate lead straight to Earth.

"Charge up in ten seconds" the operator told them.

"Anyone following us?" Dare asked.

"\_No fucking clue, but we're keeping our eyes out. Damn that smartsâ€¦|" Seth grunted to them.\_

"Seth, are you ok?" Aldric asked. Everyone looked up from the hangar as the medical team took Elena to the medical bay.

"\_I don't knowâ€¦| once this is over we need to disappear guys. Spin up now" Seth replied, trying to focus.\_

The strike wasn't as strong as the first one, but it was like a dull aching pain.

"Alright, 3, 2, 1" the operator said and they shot towards Earth. The trip would take a month with normal slip space without a spare drive, but Seth and Aaron had other plans.

"\_Alright man, ready?" Aaron asked.\_

"\_No, but let's do it anyways" Seth grunted as they worked to produce a second slip space tunnel inside the one the ships were in.\_

The \_Conundrum\_ and Heavy 2-2 suddenly popped out in front of Earth with fried slip space drives.

"Damage tracking! Slip space drive is completely offline!" the operator told Dare.

"What the hell?" Dare asked as the damage looked severe to it, but nothing else.

"\_Quicker trip for you guys, you'll get a replacement. Take care, mission accomplished" Seth told them and immediately disconnected as Aaron did the same.\_

Seth felt the pod open its door slowly and the nurses checked on him.

"Better this time, you're not as high as you were, but your nervous system is stressing. You need rest immediately" Jenny said as they pulled him out and put him on a bed. He was in no position to disagree.

"Just please do me one favor, no more slime jello" he winced as they wheeled him to his quarters.

"Don't worry, you eat after this, but the patches are going on alright? They rushed the chewables, we got a pack of them" Jenny winked at him. He sighed in relief as they brought him to his quarters and put him on his bed as Riko appeared.

"Seth, that strike" it wasn't enough to get a positive match" she told him softly as they covered him with the sheets.

"What do you mean? I thought it hit me, a partial hit me, but it hit me. Don't we have anything to go on that?" he asked.

"You'd have to have another partial hit me to get the last piece of data. We're still missing some of the ranges on it. Most of it we know about, but not all. I'm sorry" Riko apologized, feeling sad that he was in that position.

"It's not like that's going to happen, considering mission is accomplished. We got her. She's on the ship right now probably recovering" he chuckled as they gave him an electrolyte drink and slapped some vita bands all over his arms and chest. They pushed some aspirin into his mouth and he chewed it, and then they pushed a small cup to his mouth and poured it in.

"Ugh" he gulped and winced. It was the slime.

"I lied. The Caramel chews aren't ready yet still. You eat the slime and like it" Jenny told him. He glared at her, but ignored it and went to sleep. Everyone left as Riko kept an eye on his vitals.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Aldric and the others sat around Elena's bed. She was just lying there, breathing, her heart going but nothing was happening. A doctor walked in with a data pad.

"I have some bad news. We aren't reading any brain waves beyond bodily functions. It's like" she isn't there" he told them.

"Wait, you mean she's in a coma?" Aldric asked shocked. He looked at Renee. She seemed extremely worried.

"No, I mean she just isn't there. Her body is right in front of us, butâ€¦ it's almost likeâ€¦ she was downloaded" the doctor said with furrowed eyebrows. They all looked at each other.

"What do you mean downloaded?" Buck asked.

"Her neural lace was accessed somehow, I'm not quite sure what happened, but, there's a time log that I was able to pull from it? Immediately after certain brain waves just stopped transmitting" he told them.

"Oh my godâ€¦ that's why they picked her upâ€¦ they're gonnaâ€¦ they're gonna use her against usâ€¦" Jacobs said as they all looked at each other in astonishment.

Things suddenly got a whole lot worse for them as they realized that Elena wasn't there, and was. She was now their deadliest enemy until they could find some way to get her mind connected back to her body.

(Author's Note: And they have her. No they don't. Sort of. It's complicated. Elena's mind is being used as a commander for Precursor fighters. That's really not good for everyone else. Who knows? Someone might come and save the day, or not. Depends. It's complicated again.)

## 6. Pandora's Box

\*\*[1400 hours, March 8\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Unknown Location, SRI-2 DELTA]\*\*

Seth woke up from his sleep. He looked around and sat up slowly, feeling an ache all over his body.

"So you're awake" Riko said.

"Yeah, seems like it, should I go back to sleep?" he asked in an amusing tone.

"No, and frankly you'll want to talk to Captain Dare ASAP. Something is wrong" she told him. His small grin fell almost as quickly as it came up.

"What happened?" he asked. She sighed and appeared in the room, her hologram showing up with a depressed look on her face.

"There's a problemâ€¦" she told him.

"I know that, I can tell from the need to call Captain Dare, and I ask again, what happened?" he asked her.

"Brigadier General Elena Gripenâ€¦ they think she might have already been transferredâ€¦ Her body is being taken care of in the medical ward aboard ship, butâ€¦ it doesn't look goodâ€¦" she told him softly. Seth looked around and ran his fingers through his short

hair.

"FUCK!" he swore loudly and threw the sheets off of him and stood up quickly. He felt a wave of dizziness but shook his head quickly to get rid of it.

"We need to go baâ€| son of a bitch, that ship is probably long since gone by nowâ€|" he growled.

"I'm sorry Seth. You did your best" she told him.

"Yeah? My best isn't nearly good enough for her and you know it!" he snapped at her, and then softened.

"Sorryâ€| I didn't mean toâ€| wellâ€|" he tried to say and she brought a hand up to stop him calmly.

"I know about what happened between you two in the past" she told him.

"What happened? Nothing happened. She chose Andy, and I backed off. He was the best choice for her anyways, smart, athletic, good personality, hell I stayed friends with him even after that!" he told her.

"You didn't fight for her. Now you did, and I know you still will" she commented.

"It's not my choice anymore. The mission was completed, albeit partially. I'm no use to tracking that thing if it doesn't want to be tracked. If they are capable of moving between galaxies, fine, Elena took out that portal thing, but that doesn't mean they can't hide out beyond the rim. You have any idea how much area that is to search for her? And I don't even know what to look for that has her!" he barked. Riko was silent. She saw the wounded look on his face. He thought he had failed.

"We think we might have found out what might be carrying herâ€|" Riko told him and looked at the floor.

"Wait, you meanâ€| oh fuck, we walked right by it the first time and could have grabbed them! We left her and rescued her at the same time!" he almost yelled and pushed back his hair from his forehead with both of his hands. He paced around his quarters thinking.

"Metfield hasn't taken you off the mission yet also. He hasn't considered it complete yet, per his words. We're still in the ballgame, thoughâ€| with a losing scoreâ€|" she told him.

"Great, and how do we bring it back up? You saw the footage Riko. You KNOW what she's capable of flying. Now she's going to be controlling all of those fighters? We're gonna have our asses kicked if they decide to just attack us right now, imagine if they wait for reinforcements!" he growled and looked at her.

"Hey, calm down" she sternly told him. He sighed and looked away.

"Sorryâ€| alright Sethâ€| thinkâ€|" he said and looked at the

ceiling.

"Alright, brain storming. Facts. We have her body, but higher cognitive abilities not there. Fact 2, they transferred her mind to a storage container that looks crystalline, some sort of ONNet. Fact 3, she's probably controlling them and increasing the effectiveness. Alright, those are the problems we have to deal with" he said as Riko watched him.

"Three problems, now you need solutions" she commented.

"Yes. Main solution, she's controlling them. That means they might be bold enough to attack with the increased effectiveness now with fewer forces, which meansâ€¦ I might not need to look for her, she'll come to us" he said and looked down at her. She smiled.

"Solution 2, she's in an ONNet. Which means it's some sort of computer connection, which might mean she can be downloaded out somehow. I don't have an answer to that yet, but if she can be uploaded, she can be downloaded. So if each person is hypothetically in a crystal, how do you protect each one without them being connected to the ship?" he asked.

"A watch dog" she replied.

"Ok, so there's most likely an AI inside guarding her, and most likely in a simulation or she'd never help them. Brain washing. She thinks she's fighting Precursors when in fact she's shooting down Long Swords. I can handle that if I find her. The AI on the other handâ€¦" he trailed off.

"It's doubtful we can recover the crystal physically, but if you can somehow do it, I can definitely help with that" she told him and cracked her holographic knuckles. Didn't matter how powerful the Precursor AI was compared to Cortana, Riko was a whole other type of AI. She was designed to kill other AIs or anyone sneaking about in their data. It would have one hell of a fight against her.

"Ok, crystal somehow here. Slip space drive. I need two, maybe three. Fuck it, get four brought over here. Holyâ€¦ wait a minute, Sigma Octanus IV?" he asked. Riko's eyes went wide.

"The crystal that was giving coordinates for Dr. Halsey and the others after the fall of Reachâ€¦ no, it has to have been a different crystalâ€¦ what were the colors of the ones you saw?" she asked.

"Blue, green, I don't know, would it make a difference?" he asked.

"Might, depending on who was inside of it. Could have been a Precursor loaded into it. It gave a star chart for Cortana remember? Could have been a navigator for a ship. Might have even told of where the portal wasâ€¦" she told him.

"So, if it wasn't destroyed we might have known about this beforehand? Well thank you Dr. Halsey for leaving the damned thing behind on Reachâ€¦ maybe Cortana has a backupâ€¦" he growled to the air.

"The base was under attack Seth, you expect her to pick up everything she does research on? She left her journal behind!" she reasoned with him.

"Oy, and we had to find that instead of the crystalâ€¦ fine, spilt milk. Moving on. So wait until there is an attack, Aaron and Thelma guard my back, I slip inside the ship, find the crystal, go inside to see if she's thereâ€¦ wait nevermind, I'll do something better. I go into her body's brain, look for the connection of the missing brain waves, follow them to the right crystal, and once I find it, open a slip space gate right there and drag it back through. Hopefully I can do it quick enough before that damned defense goes upâ€¦" he explained.

"You can't read her mind Seth, just follow the brain wave transfer connection. It's got to be there" she smirked.

"I'm sorry to say Riko, I can't in fact read minds. You know that. Everyone thought we could, but it doesn't work. If we did, we have a really good chance to be lost in the memories, and that's bad." Riko chuckled.

"Alright, so crystal is here. Fine. Most of the plan is complete. We HAVE her. Now, you go in right?" she asked.

"Yup. Pandora's box gets opened. I have no idea what I'll find in there" he told her.

"Remember, Tachi and I will be guarding the door. If you see anything wrong, you grab her and pull her out. I'll take care of the guard dog" she smirked. Somehow, he was very afraid of the smirk she was giving. He had seen some of her handy work on AIs through reports, but not while she was doing it. He cringed. He knew the Precursor AI might be strong, but he doubted it was designed to go toe to toe with her. She didn't act like Cortana did and ping every port she could find or copy herself. She prided herself on designing cutting edge viruses, worms and Trojans, something no other AI would dare go near for fear of them turning on them and chewing them apart. She made them like they were an art, and hit with them like a Mack truck. He hoped they found a way to increase her lifespan. He would definitely mourn her loss once her nine years were up. She was unique, and his friend.

"You know this is one sketchy plan right?" Seth asked.

"You're the one who thought it up" she smirked and winked.

"This is insane, we want them to attack usâ€¦ we have to wait for it though. Who knows when it will happen? And they might not even attack Earth for all we know" he told her. They both looked at each other and said the same thing.

"Bait" they said in unison.

"What would be meaty enough to draw their attention though?" he asked. Riko sifted through data quickly and called her brother, Tachi.

"I'm a little busy right now" he responded.

"Make yourself unbusy, we need your help" she growled.

Tachi popped his hologram into the room, a Goth man with a green Mohawk. He had piercings all along his ears and a mesh tank top. He had the same spiked collar and bracers that Riko had, and multiple tattoos of 1s and 0s running down his arms. They changed rapidly, as it was most obviously code. Seth thought for a bit. He might have taken that idea from Cortana.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"We need the files of anything above top secret that the Precursors might want" Riko asked. Tachi sighed and looked things up quickly in his database.

"I might have something for you. They use Neural Physics correct?" he asked smiling.

"Wait, you meanâ€¦| no, I didn't get that memo!" she growled.

"I don't tell you everything dear sister, and it's not even finished yet. It barely works. A Sine Node Amplifier" he told them.

"I vaguely remember hearing about that. Some sort of weird beacon thing right? It can amplify all neural manipulation and reactionary viewing correct? Doesn't work on normal humans, just usâ€¦| or the Precursorsâ€¦|" he suddenly understood. If they got their hands on it, they could reinforce their constructs, or make them permanent.

The entire theory behind Neural Physics was any construct made by someone worked on the idea that they would live to maintain the construct with their mind. Considering how little they knew about Precursors, it was most likely that they could halt aging and live forever, and therefore their constructs would do the same. If they died, their construct faded, though the hypothesis was that they might have the capability to transfer the idea to another and continue the containment of the construct's physical form. At the moment, if they could in fact resend the idea of a construct to another, then Seth and the other remote viewers had no way to stop it, as they had never tried or knew what to look for. They were children playing in an adult world with Neural Physics, albeit child prodigies.

"That's correct Seth. However, I don't have to stress how important it is that they don't get their hands on it. The beacon is the size of an orbital MAC platform. It's being hidden by multiple active camouflage systems around it while it is still in its berth. ECM jamming is beyond anything from any ship, and multiple AIs are guarding it. It does not have any physical defenses of its own however, and does not in fact work for what we want it to, though it is operational. At most, it will send a pulse that will warn all psychically gifted organisms about its presence. That pulse is currently what is being tuned to produce an effect with a translation system on your pod. The system isn't even working, hence the whole thing isn't operational. It only acts like a bull's-eye" Tachi explained.

"But it still works, and that pulse is exactly what we need! Ok, let me run this by Metfield andâ€¦| oh god, we have to run it by the old man this timeâ€¦|" Seth groaned.



"I take it you aren't fond of Admiral Hood?" Riko chuckled.

"Not really. He's soâ€¦ I don't know, he acts oblivious to the smaller problems that make the larger problems bigger. You knock out the feet, not the head. The head goes with the feet and you have a much easier time" he told them.

"You'd make an excellent politician" Tachi laughed.

"Bite me Tachi. I'm GRID, through and through." Seth stood tall and proud. He knew his job, and he knew what the agency did. They fought from the shadows, and plucked the right strings in the UNSC and the UEG like fine tuned instruments in a symphony. ONI had nothing on these masters. They could hide an amplifier beacon in orbit around Earth from them.

"Alright, let me tell Metfield to contact you" Tachi smirked and disappeared.

"Game changed. Let's ante up. Aces are on the side lines, Jokers are wild" he said to Riko. She grinned.

\*\*[0300 hours, March 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, \*\*\_\*\*Conundrum\*\*\_\*\* Carrier, Orbiting Earth]\*\*

Dare sat with a cup of coffee in her hand. Her crew was on edge. It took two weeks for everything to be put in place silently, and the UNSC was simply told there might be a Jiralhanae invasion fleet coming with stolen technology. Seth knew better obviously. GRID ships were hidden at key points, with a lot of cutting edge technology that not even the UNSC or ONI knew about. One was a gravity well projector. They only worked on one ship at a time, but it acted similar to ECM for slip space drives, screwing up coordinate calculations, destabilizing power flow, pretty much making the entire thing useless. They had to stay in range however.

"Any sign of anything?" Dare asked her sensors officer.

"Nothing yet. Is this plan gonna work?" he asked. The \_Conundrum\_ crew as a whole thought it was Precursors attacking, but Dare was allowed to know about the plan, but just barely, as was Aldric and most of Raven squadron. Falken was kept out of the loop. She had tried to get the squadron transferred to another ship and then head out to fight the brutes on their border to Sangheili space, but it was declined by Admiral Hood himself. They were needed.

"Quiet out thereâ€¦ anybody get the feeling they might not come?" Aldric asked Dare through his coms from his fighter.

"\_They'll come" Seth suddenly told him and Aldric looked around instinctively.\_

"Seth, you're here?" he asked.

"\_The whole gang is here Commander. We made this plan. Trust us, it'll work. We absolutely hate being shown up by overgrown lobsters. It's party time. I brought the tequila" he chuckled to him.\_

"Whole gang?" Dare asked in confusion.

"How many of you are there? Wait, forget I said anything, scratch that" Aldric said and shut his mouth.

"\_Smart. Alright, bug light is turning on" Seth said.\_

"\_I'm watching Seth, nothing yet" Thelma said as she flitted around the edge of the solar system. Aaron jumped from planet to planet inside while Seth watched the fleet.\_

The beacon slowly turned on as the pulse emitted from seemingly nowhere. It wasn't readable from anything other than special sensors attached to GRID ships, and only barely. It didn't tell where it was coming from; just that it was near Earth.

"Keep your eyes frosty, we don't know if they have stealth systems" Aldric told the rest of the squad. Falken was moping that he was given specific command over the squadron for this mission. He was more than happy to oblige. He had Sarah to his side now after she recovered. Everyone seemed to notice a protectiveness now from Aldric towards Sarah. It almost seemed similar to how he treated Elena. Jacobs had noticed it for the past month, and he had reason to believe he might have moved his affections to her. Sarah was constantly blushing around him too, and he was the only other one who she allowed to actually hug her besides Elena. Everyone else, including Merricks, she cringed from when they tried.

"I've got somethingâ€¦ I thinkâ€¦ I meanâ€¦ it's smallâ€¦ but it's thereâ€¦" Sarah said as she sat on right wingman to Aldric.

"You either found something or you didn't Lieutenant, which one is it?" Falken growled.

"\_Shut your face hole right now. Sarah, where?" Seth suddenly growled out.\_

Sarah seemed frightened by the disembodied voice.

"Uhâ€¦ umâ€¦ wellâ€¦ uhâ€¦ thereâ€¦" she almost quivered as she placed a waypoint on their sensors.

"\_Aaron, Thelma" Seth said and felt their presences immediately near him. They were ready.\_

"Tear detected! Here they come!" the sensors officer told them. Out of the void came two destroyersâ€¦ and fifteen fighters.

"Oh fuck! fifteen? We can barely handle ten!" Jacobs said worriedly.

"I don't want to hear that Lieutenant! You will fight and you will win!" Falken growled.

"Enough! This isn't about winning, this is about getting that crystal out of one of them! Seth, are you ready?" Aldric roared.

"\_I was born ready. Aaron, Thelma, you got deflection duty. All GRID ships, gravity wells please" Seth grinned in his mind.\_

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Breached Airlock]\*\*

"Heads up! I've got other detected signatures coming from the destroyers! Boarding craft!" the sensors officer said.

"They want her body back. They'll have problems moving through our hallwaysâ€¦| marines get ready! Spartans to stations!" Dare ordered. Marines ran to defensive posts around the ship as ODSs covered them. Spartans ran in twos to openings near the medical bay. Elena's body lay motionless on the medical bed, almost peaceful with electrodes lining her forehead. Her father sat next to her holding her hand.

"All ground pounders, keep your defensive positions. They're big and they carry rail weaponry and beam weaponry. They take a lot of damage before going down. Use heavy weapons at all times on them" Fred said over the coms.

Fred and John ran down a hallway towards one position holding rocket launchers on their backs and Spartan lasers. They each carried a bandolier of grenades and were carrying chain guns in their hands. Marines were all aimed at areas that could be breached as the boarding ships came towards them. Pelicans were ready for landing attempts inside the hangars, armed alongside Vultures. HAMMER drones were activated all over the ship along with ARGUS drones equipped with Anti-tank missiles. They were expecting a hard fight, and knew the bulkheads could handle the damage they would be slinging, though any rail rounds would do some damage, so defensive barriers were doubled in front of each other.

"Inbound! Craft coming in! Defensive weapons are firing!" weapons officers said as Cherry auto targeted them with autocannons and lasers to tear them apart. It was slow work, with only a few blowing up as the rest of the fleet tried to assist. They were heading specifically for the Conundrum and the beacon, though they didn't know where the beacon was.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Creator of Worlds]\*\*

"Going loud!" Aldric said as they engaged the fighters with at least ten other squadrons assisting. They already knew what they'd be fighting. Elena.

The Precursor fighters broke formation quickly and chose their targets immediately. They fired their beams in twos at each target, taking out eight Long Swords almost immediately.

"Break and engage!" Aldric ordered as Raven squadron broke and attacked. The fighters teamed up quickly to track the Precursors, but they dodged far better than they previously did. As Aldric shot after one, two tried to flank him quickly, but Roberts tried to intercept. They swapped target before they were even finished, and went right for him.

"Shit!" he yelled and broke off quickly, firing aerosols into space and hauling as fast as he could. One continued after him while the second broke away, working on intercepting his trajectory.

"Oh fuck, this is getting really bad!" Roberts yelled as he dodged as much as he could, as a torpedo flew by and then reengaged him. Elena was using her patented laser targeting to bring them back around to

hit him again. The whole armada of fighters was desperately trying to hold off a clearly superior foe in dog fighting.

"Elena, don't do this!" Aldric growled as he dodged two torpedoes and fired two flares, and just as they shot off into the distance and reengaged, he fired his Vulcans at them. They flowed around the spray of fire and came close to hitting him again, but he fired his rail guns and they quickly exploded.

"Whoa that was close" he breathed out as he went to assist Sarah. Eight Sabres were trying to engage two fighters that had her on the run, but one of them kept flipping around and firing torpedoes behind, and took out two quickly.

"This isn't going so good!" Jacobs yelled as he dodged two beams and then one was deflected. Thelma was doing her best to keep them off the fighters while Aaron tried to fling the boarding craft away from the Conundrum and the beacon.

"Going in" Seth said and shot into Elena's head. He quickly looked for neuron firing and followed the waves he could sense around, finding a main source. He noticed multiple areas that he knew led to memories she had, but he didn't dare go near them. Some of them could have been about him, he didn't know.\_

He shot towards the second destroyer after he found the connection and right to the crystalâ€| locked into a control panel. The crystal was a glowing white with small bluish tints coming from it.

"Nothing is ever easy is itâ€|"\_ \_he grumbled.\_

He thought for a moment. If he ripped the attachments off, the defenses would most likely turn on and knock him out of the ship, and clock him one in the face. He had to be careful. He searched around under the crystal for anything holding it up. He found a holding tank that it was set in.

"Knock their feet out from under themâ€|" Seth grinned in his mind.\_

He unscrewed anything that he could find that was holding up the crystal, and felt it slowly lower deeper into the control panel. He then unlocked the panel that was in front of it and held it close. The panel wasn't actually locked closed with bolts and screws, but he had destabilized the molecular bonding of the materials. He knew the Precursors would be similar to Forerunner technology, and they didn't have seams.

"Found it, Riko, slip space opening. I need two of them. Ready?" he asked.\_

"Two? What?" Riko asked confused.

"Just do it! Now!" Seth yelled.\_

Aldric flipped and dodged four torpedoes only to have them reengage him. He was getting desperate. He was already running low on flares and they had barely been at the fight for five minutes.

Two slip space openings occurred, and one immediately was transferred to the bridge. The second was placed right next to the control panel as Seth opened the door and flung the crystal right through it, and sent the connection right outside a hangar bay with a waiting pelican near the \_Conundrum.\_

"Package found and retrieved!" the pilot said and shot straight towards the carrier. The fighters suddenly stopped functioning as well as they did, and Aldric barely escaped three beams coming at him.

"They're still attacking, but it isn't nearly as bad now! Still worse than previous times though!" Aldric laughed as he finally took out a fighter that didn't fling his own missiles back at him.

Inside the carrier however, the fighting was tough. Hails of gunfire was opening up at five positions across the ship as marines fought with all their strength to keep the invaders pinned in their boarding crafts. Covenant had normally waited for escape pods to eject and then latched onto the openings to come in or seal onto windows and penetrate that way, but these would simply rip the escape pods out and tear a piece of the wall out and open up a section to fight at.

Two HAMMER drones were opening up on one section while Fred and John kept up the pressure. One trooper came out of the boarding craft and they saw it literally light up like they'd expect an angel to do with the amount of rounds flying at its shields. They failed slowly but eventually as it got one shot off and blew a marine apart, along with his squad mate behind him.

"I have four others in that craft!" Fred yelled to the others as they kept their fire up. The invaders would duck out quickly for a few shots and then duck back in, letting their shields recharge as the rail rounds would hit defensive barriers, and actually knock them back as well as damage them severely.

Renee kept her squad covered as she fired from a mounted machine gun as Milo fired a rocket launcher.

Seth shot out immediately from the ship just as it fired its mind defense, and he barely got away as he felt a light tingle behind him. He flew towards the carrier and moved between the five positions of the boarding parties.

"\_Pull out of those sections! Dare! Vacuum them!" Seth told the defenders.\_

"Are you nuts? They'll keep pushing!" Dare yelled worriedly.

"\_Not if I keep them knocked back! Do it!" Seth said as he pushed with a gravitic force towards the invaders. They launched off their feet and into the back of the boarding craft.\_

"Everybody pull back!" Fred ordered as they retreated from their sections as Seth shot between each position and did it again, and again, and again until the defenders were out of the sections. Bulkheads closed and they vacuum sealed. All sections depressurized as Aaron came in and ripped off two while Seth ripped three off the walls and sent them tumbling into space. Multiple Vultures were

hovering just outside, waiting for the chance to unleash hell onto them.

"Boarding parties neutralized. No more breaches" an officer told Dare.

"Fighters are still having problems out there! We just lost Rhino squadron! They're completely dark!" the sensors officer told them.

"No response from Wolf squadron or Fox squadron. God damn that's over 40 fighters!" another told them.

"Take out those destroyers!" Dare ordered as the fleet unleashed a volley of MAC rounds at them and charged up particle accelerators. GRID ships came in from behind and fired as well, while prowlers detonated Moray mines hidden in the area. All MAC platforms in the area fired in unison, and dropped the shields on one of the destroyers. They returned fire and took out seven cruisers in one volley.

"Jesus, that'sâ€¦" Falken was astonished.

"Now do you know what we're up against Colonel?" Aldric growled.

"I've never seen so much damageâ€¦" she almost whispered.

"Falken why aren't you watching Sarah's six! I told you to back her up!" Aldric yelled.

"I need help!" Sarah screamed as she shot off away from the squadron dog fight with not one, but three fighters on her tail. She was jinking left and right, doing everything she could to keep them off her. She unloaded a barrage of mines from behind her, as her main focus most of the time was decoy in the squadron, which she was extremely good at. She was Kelly in space. She required someone to assist after though, as Spartans always did for Kelly.

"Hang on!" Aldric replied and shot off towards her. He wasn't going to let anything happen to her. The fighters opened up on her as she did what she could to keep away from the beams, but some grazed her shields. She screamed and dodged as her shields flickered. Aldric checked his status display and saw her shields were at ten percent. She wouldn't survive another strike.

"Sarah! I'm coming just keep moving! Sarah?" Aldric asked. No response, he could just hear what sounded like hyperventilation on the other side. Sarah pulled her legs up to her chest and let go of her flight controls, sitting in a fetal position in her cockpit.

"Please don't kill me Elena, please don't kill meâ€¦ I promise I'll be betterâ€¦ pleaseâ€¦" she started muttering.

"Oh fuckâ€¦ Merricks! Suppression fire on them now! Falken, get in there and assist me on the double!" he roared. The fighters charged their weapons for a final assault on the poor pilot. They fired, and carved into the shields. They briefly held before collapsing and burned into the armor. Sarah screamed as they punched through the

other side, but no pieces of debris were blown off. Her right engine sputtered as her fighter continued on. Her cockpit was barely missed.

"I have a lock!" Merricks yelled as he fired his particle cannons and laser at the same time, and hit one of them dead on. He melted through its shields and its armor, and tore through the other side and lightly hit the fighter behind it. Falken fired two missiles on the second as Aldric fired everything he had at the first. He quickly tore it apart as Falken continued to fight the second, as it diverted away from its crippled prey to attack her. Merricks followed after and Falken opened up with her Vulcans and then dodged incoming fire.

"Sarah, can you hear me?" Aldric asked. He still heard breathing over his coms, but she was in such a mental state he didn't know if she was hurt or just her mind snapped. She was still wounded regardless, just one wasn't physical. Aldric flew close to her fighter, as it could barely move on its own. It was still functional, but damaged.

"I didn't do anything wrongâ€¦ I didn't do anything wrongâ€¦ I'm a good girlâ€¦ I'm a good girlâ€¦" Sarah mumbled.

"Sarahâ€¦" Aldric whispered.

Seth shot towards the hangar just as the pelican touched down. He had to finish this.

"\_Aaron, going in heavy and loud. Riko, you connected?" Seth asked.\_

"I'm right here Seth. Ready to rumble" she growled. They had the crystal surrounded with multiple terminals and wires now, though it was still in its casing, most likely still keeping the connection going. Seth flew into the crystal and was suddenly assaulted with something he didn't expect.

He slowly floated out into the front of a house. He looked around and noticed he had a body, but he shouldn't.

"\_Physical projectionâ€¦ not goodâ€¦ it means there are written laws placed in here to control the environmentâ€¦" Seth whispered as Riko listened in. She still hadn't shown up yet.\_

"I'm having difficulties following you in Seth! Security firewalls are trying to keep me out! Tachi! Cortana!" Riko yelled. Cortana's presence was felt right next to Riko's as she started hacking the security. Seth was temporarily on his own.

He looked around and saw a living room with a trideo and a coffee table with a couch behind it. The kitchen was through a door at the end of the entrance hallway with stairs running parallel to the ascending opposite of his spot. He could hear some sounds from upstairs.

"\_I'm going up" he whispered.\_

He walked slowly up the stairs as he saw photographs in frames of family, Elena when she was six, when she was thirteen, when she was

fifteen and sixteen, her graduation photo from high school and her military picture, and one with her and Andy holding each other. He got to the top and looked towards a room. As he walked towards it with the door cracked open, he could see faint lights moving around behind.

He opened the door slowly and saw a sim pod sitting in the middle of the room, with model airplanes all hanging from the ceiling. There was no bed, just the sim pod and a dresser, with the closet wide open with clothing strewn about. Inside the pod was Elena sitting and running the simulation. He walked carefully in and looked over her shoulder. She was fighting in a Black Blade Mk II against multiple fighters, but he knew well enough from the actions they pulled they were not Precursors, though they looked like it.

Just as she hit another fighter and it exploded, Seth got an acknowledgement from Riko that another Long Sword was destroyed. She was killing her friends, her fellow pilots, her brothers and sisters in arms, and she didn't even know it.

"Elenaâ€|" he whispered. She glanced at him and then immediately took a double take and gawked, then jumped out of the pod and backed away from him.

"Oh shitâ€|" she whispered. She looked like she had seen a monster. She might have.

"Hey, I'm not the bad guy here, ok? Calm down" he said but she clearly wasn't listening. He focused on trying to remove the veil of illusion over her but was suddenly grabbed and thrown from the room. He landed sliding across the carpet with a thump. He looked up and saw some massive Precursor standing there, and got a glimpse of it in its illusion form. Andy. Elena ran up behind it and hid behind its back.

"Elena it isn't him!" He yelled as it looked down at him and picked him up and threw him over the banister railing. He landed and felt the pain.

"Fuck, Riko!" he yelled.

"Almostâ€|" she said as Cortana was overloading firewalls like they were popcorn exploding in a microwave. She was doing what she did best. Hack.

"Got it!" Cortana said as Riko slipped in.

Andy jumped from the banister as Seth got up and tried to run back up the stairs, and land in front of him. He tried to punch him but he dodged and grabbed his arm and snapped it back, hearing the sound of breaking bone. Seth screamed as he was thrown up the stairs and hit his head against the top stair. He crawled up it as the illusionary Andy grabbed his legs and pulled him down. He was definitely no match for this thing inside the realm it built. Elena simply watched from the top.

"You can't let it keep doing this!" he yelled and focused on clearing the veil just as it socked him in the stomach. It knocked the wind out of him, but he focused everything he could to cast the veil away.



"Kill it Andy!... Andy?" Elena suddenly asked. The illusionary Andy looked up at her and walked up the stairs past Seth and came over to her.

"Get in your room, close the door, wait for me to come get you, I don't want you to see this sweetheart" he told her softly and caressed her cheek. She looked down at Seth as he rolled over to try and breathe and climb up the stairs, and suddenly saw him for who he was.

"Seth?" she asked in shock and then looked at the being in front of her. It closed the door on her and turned around. Seth looked at it with wide eyes and rolled down the stairs, trying to keep away from it. He crawled across the ground away and got up as it leapt over the banister again and came towards him. Riko loaded in right at that moment right in front of it, a third as tall as him, but size was about to not matter.

\*\*[Music: Powerman 5000 " Show Me What You've Got]\*\*

Riko socked it right in the chest and launched it clear across the hallway. Her size meant nothing to her strength. She cracked her knuckles and got ready to do what she did best. It got up as she grabbed it and slammed it into the wall nearby, breaking it clear through and then throwing it into the kitchen. Each strike she was doing was a devastator type virus or worm she was using against it. Seth had never imagined this was what it would look like for her laying the smack down to another AI.

It got up and tried to throw a punch at her, but she actually took it to her cheek and looked right back at it and glared, then uppercut it and launched it clean off the ground with a two foot ground clearance. Somehow, Seth knew if it was Cortana instead of Riko, she would have been flattened against the ground from the hit she just took, but she completely ignored it like a bump. Seth had a completely new found respect for her work as he watched in awe as she kneeled over it and smashed her fists continuously into its chest, hearing cracks as its rib cage crumpled from her hits. It was like a car was being smashed into it each time she punched, and she didn't stop until she saw it collapse. The AI faded away as she got up and wiped her lip as a small dribble of blood came out, and she spit it away. A bruise was slowly forming on her cheek as she walked back and smirked.

Seth's eyebrows were raised really high as his eyes were bug eyed. She was absolutely freaky against other AIs. She really was a bouncer.

They both looked up to Elena's bedroom and saw the door was cracked open with an eye looking out of it. Seth held his hand as he winced and looked at her as the door slowly opened and she walked out.

"Seth? What's| what are you doing here? What the hell was that thing! Oh my god, that was Andy! You killed| no| I don't understand! What the hell is going on?" She yelled down, almost to the point of hysteria as she looked around hoping for an answer to spring up.

"Elena, we're here to rescue you. You're not actually here, this isn't your house. That was a Precursor remember? Think clearly" he grunted as the pain shot through his arm. She walked slowly down the stairs in a t-shirt and jean shorts with sandals on, and looked at both of them. Riko glanced at Seth and then back at her.

"Iâ€¦ I was in my fighterâ€¦ and thenâ€¦ I opened a slip space tunnelâ€¦ and thenâ€¦ it was just dark. I ended up here after" she said softly and looked up at him from her view of the floor.

"You were captured by Precursors, and they loaded you up to some piloting crystal thing. We still don't know how it works, but you have to get upstairs and turn that sim pod off!" he told her. She looked between them and then nodded, and ran upstairs and pulled the power cable from it. The thing sputtered and shut down.

"They just dropped in capability again! It's now a hell of a lot easier to handle them!" Aldric yelled out through coms. They had taken out eight of the fighters and one of the destroyers was already devastated. The second one was burning as it retreated with the last of the alien fighters.

"They're retreating! We won!" one pilot said as they tried to open slip space portals but couldn't. GRID was keeping them there.

"Hit them from behind!" Dare ordered as the fleet opened up on them. The fighters took hits as they ran, and two more were taken out as they tried to move as far away as possible from the GRID ships. They moved so fast compared to the UNSC and GRID that they finally reached a safe distance and slip space portals opened. They slid in and vanished.

"Seth, why is my bed not in my room?" she asked as she came back down and looked at his arm.

"Oh my god! You're hurt!" she gasped as she looked up towards the bathroom and was going to run up to get a medical kit. He grabbed her arm.

"No, it's not what you think. Look, this isn't real. This isn't your house. You're in a crystal right now, and your body is outside. It's really complicated ok? But you have to trust me. Do you trust me Elena? Truly?" he asked her as he looked into her eyes. She stared at him and finally answered after a few seconds.

"With my life, you know that" she said softly. He remembered she had said that a long time ago as well, before she was officially with Andy. His face softened temporarily, and he wanted nothing more than to hug her right then and there.

"Ok, now, as I said, we're in a crystal, but not physically. Your mind is in here, and mine as well. I'm here to get you out of here, and back to your body. Don't ask, you said you trust me, just walk through the front door there. Do not stop once through alright? Just keep going until you wake up. Please?" he asked her. She looked at Riko and she nodded and smiled.

"Fine, alright, don't worry" she said and walked forward towards the door. She turned around and looked at him one last time.

"I'm going to see you on the other side right? I mean, we haven't seen each other in a while, I wondered what happened to you. It wasâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I don't know, it felt odd with you disappearing and me going through the Academy. I wrote you know? And you never wrote back. I thought you disappeared" she told him.

He reached towards her with his other hand but thought twice and brought it down.

"I couldn't tell you where I was. It's part of my job. I'm sorry. We both have secrets, mine are justâ€¦ they can't be found out by anyone. I was still there sometimes though Elena, you justâ€¦ couldn't see meâ€¦" he said softly.

"Like some guardian angel? You always did that around me. Thanks for that" she said and looked at the door again before looking back.

"I'll see you on the other side?" she asked again. He hesitated.

"Yeah, sure" he told her. He lied.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Yeah" he said. He made a lot of promises in the past, and broke them because of his job.

"Pinkie swear?" she asked. He went silent. If he did that, he couldn't break it. He just couldn't. It was the one thing that no one ever did to her, ever. He had to make a decision.

"Sure" he finally said and smiled, and then walked up to her and did it. She smiled at him and chuckled.

"See you on the other side then" she said and walked through the door.

"Why did you give up on her?" Riko asked softly.

"I didn't give upâ€¦ I made sure she was going to be taken care ofâ€¦" he told her as he looked at the door.

"So you surrendered to Andy? What makes you think you couldn't do a better job? You know what? Bullshit, you didn't do your best and you know it, you could have easily won her over if you actually tried. You hold yourself back all the fucking time!" She growled at him. He flipped around and glared at her, but she was right. He balled his hands into fists, but then stopped as his arm hurt from the pain. She ran up to him and grabbed his arm carefully. He couldn't stay mad at her, especially when she was looking out for him.

He knew it wasn't real, but he enjoyed seeing Elena smile at him for the first time in over six years before she had gone through the door. And it would be another six before it happened again if ever once she was back in her body. She'd go back to Andy, and he'd go back to doing GRID's secret work behind the scenes. She'd be a general and married, and most likely have kids with Andy, while he'd just be forgotten again. He knew he had to do it though, as he never expected himself to think of his own wants. He had to do what was

right for her, even if it was painful for him. He always did, and that was why he was always protecting her. He just never knew about the fight at Deliverance. He was taking out insurgents at the time. He couldn't be everywhere, regardless of his abilities. He covered his emotions up to everybody, even Arling during his first meeting involving rescuing Elena. It hurt hearing she was dead at the time.

"Sometimes you do what you have to to protect the ones you love. Look at me Riko, I'm a remote viewer. I have above top secret written all over me. IF she even found out half of what I do, they'd take her out for real" he told her.

"Don't you remember that one fucking detail? Oh yeah, I remember, you missed that class for real! Fuck, I can't believe that happened! You went into the wrong room and got knocked around by some guards cause you weren't supposed to be there and went to the medical bay!" Riko bonked herself on the head.

"Wait, what?" he asked.

"Sanctioned family members! Directly connected to you! Under specific circumstances, some family members may know what you are if they are military or of similar job description, but not the details of what you are doing like what missions you are pulling beyond what they are a part of. Your parents couldn't know, but if you ever married her, she could know you're GRID you idiot! I thought you caught up on this stuff in your off hours!" she yelled at him in astonishment.

He gawked.

"Oh shitâ€¦| butâ€¦| damn itâ€¦| FUCK!" he screamed and looked at the floor. It didn't mean anything. She was still going back to Andy.

"Come on, let's get out of here" she said softly and put her arms around him in a gentle hug as she lead him towards the door. It would be the only time she would be able to make physical contact with her friend that they could feel, the only time an AI had ever made physical contact with a human, and it was only to his mind. They walked through the door and into the white light beyond.

**\*\*[One Hour Later]\*\***

Elena slowly opened her eyes. Jack and Milo were sitting near her and suddenly jumped up.

"Doctor!" Milo yelled as the doctor ran in as she looked around.

"She's awake. How are you feeling?" she asked. Elena blinked and looked at her father. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it gently as tears boiled up in his eyes.

"My head hurtsâ€¦|" she hoarsely said as she looked around and furrowed her eyebrows.

"Where's Seth?" she asked as the doctor checked her vitals. Jack looked at Milo.

"We haven't seen him in six years Elena, why would you ask for him?" Jack asked. Her eyes came opened wider as she slowly sat up as the doctor tried to push her down.

"Wait, you have to rest, stop" she told her as a nurse came up to help to stop her.

"Wait, where is he? He said he'd be here" she asked again as she brushed their hands off her.

"He's not here Elena. We don't know where he is" Milo told her. She looked around behind the doctor, hoping to see him through the glass doors. John and Renee walked in with full MJOLNIR and battle armor, rifles still in hand as Buck came up behind them with his ODS helmet still on, visor unpolarized. They saw her and sighed in relief.

"Thank fucking god" Buck cheered and did a fist pump.

"Hey" she said as she still hoped Seth would come around. She wanted to see her friend from so long ago, the man she nearly fell in love with. The man who saved her.

"That poltergeist works miracles" Buck chuckled and high fived Renee.

"Poltergeist?" Elena asked.

"Yeah, he said that's what his nickname is, like you, Ghost" he said and looked between Jack and Elena.

"What'd I say?" he asked as Elena looked confused as she thought things over while she looked at the floor.

"You're vitals look good, surprising. You may be able to stand even" the doctor said. Elena slowly slid out of bed with her medical gown closed behind her. She stood up wobbly and looked at everyone.

"Welcome back" John said just as a medical bed was wheeled in, Sarah on it. She was curled in a fetal position as Aldric was following the medical team, the rest of the squadron right next to him. Elena watched as Sarah was brought into another room, and Elena walked towards the doors slowly. The nurse helped her as she went into Sarah's room, and they checked her vitals.

"She's in shock, she won't respond" the doctor said. Sarah just slowly rocked as she didn't notice anyone.

"I'm a good girlâ€¦ I'm a good girlâ€¦ I didn't do anything badâ€¦" she kept repeating to herself.

"Sarahâ€¦ Sarah it's me, Aldric, you don't have to worry about anything. You're safe" he said quietly as he tried to hold her hand. She kept pulling away from him as he kept grabbing it and holding it between his hands. She tried to pull away one more time but he wouldn't let go. She tried to fight him off suddenly, beating against his armor as she just burst into sobs and screams.

"Please don't hurt me! Please! I promise I'll be better!" she

screamed as Aldric tried to calm her down and grabbed her arm. She struggled but then just flopped against his chest armor and cried. His helmet was off and he just held her.

"No one is going to hurt you, I swear it. No one will ever hurt you ever again. You were great today, don't worry. The best out there no doubt" he whispered as he rested his chin on top of her head. Everyone just watched as she cried.

"I swear I'll do better next time" she choked out.

"You already did incredibly well out there Sarah. Shhh" Aldric whispered as she slowly calmed down and literally fell asleep from exhaustion and her nerves. He laid her down on the bed as he got up and sighed, and looked behind him and suddenly did a double take.

"No way" he almost whispered as he saw Elena standing there.

"Hey" she cracked a small smile and he walked over to her and gave her a hug.

"God it's good to see you again" he whispered as she hugged back.

"Good to be seen" she chuckled as he let go and the others came over to hug her. She felt a bit self-conscious with her gown on, and asked a nurse if they might bring her something else. They nodded and ran to grab her some pajamas. She walked into another room and changed, and then had a long conversation with everyone in Sarah's room while they watched over their friend.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

"I promised her" Seth whispered as he just sat at his desk.

"You promised her in that crystal. It wasn't physically a pinkie swear, so technically you don't have to abide by it" Riko tried to comfort him. She couldn't hug him now, but she still rested her holographic hand on his shoulder.

"It's still a promise I should have kept" he sighed and started to get up.

"Sorry to intrude, but you have a call, put through scrambled channels" Tachi chuckled over the intercom.

"Who?" Seth asked grumbling.

"Arling" he replied.

"I'm not really interested in another mission so quickly" Seth growled.

"You'll want to talk to him, trust me" he chuckled. Seth turned on the terminal and looked at it.

"Yes Cory?" he asked.

"Ah good, I got you. Transferring connection to the \_Conundrum, \_per request. Don't get angry, we got approval through this mode" he said and the channel died and swapped to the CIC. Seth looked annoyed, then confused, and wondered what was happening. Dare sprung up.

"Hey, so that's your face huh? You don't look so bad. Seth right?" she asked.

"Yeah? Remind me to kill Arling personally Riko" Seth gritted his teeth.

"Top of the list Seth" she replied, also annoyed. It was one hell of a breach of protocol to do that. Arling would lose more than just his liaison status.

"Don't get angry at Cory, he was doing it for us. I, personally, wanted to thank you for everything you just did for us as well as Elena. I still don't know how you did it, but thank you for all of your hard work" Dare told him and smiled.

"You're welcome, but it's part of the job. Anything else or can I cut the feed?" he told her still annoyed.

"Wait! There's one other person who wants to thank you!" Dare growled and stepped aside. Elena walked into the picture. Seth's anger quickly drained as he just looked at her with sadness.

"Hey" she said softly.

"Heyâ€¦ I'm sorry I couldn'tâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I'm not exactly on your ship Elenaâ€¦ I can't tell you where I amâ€¦ but I technically didn't break my promise since you're seeing me here! That's ok right?" he asked wincing, hoping he didn't hurt her feelings by not being there. He could have stayed in the pod for a bit more, waited until she was awake and spoke to her, something to let her know he was around, but he didn't. She took it upon herself to talk to him. She always did that, and he'd always open up to her every time. He was always worried if he made a move, she'd back away from him, as he had considered himself weird.

"Iâ€¦ knowâ€¦ I checked the rostersâ€¦ I'll let this one slide, for now. Thanks Seth" she smiled as she looked at him. He smiled back. She always did that, every time she smiled it was infectious for him.

"So, you're awake. That's great news. I bet you're hungry" he chuckled. She giggled as well.

"I scarfed down something before I called. You're the first person we worked on calling. I'm going to check on my mother in a bit as wellâ€¦ and thenâ€¦ Andyâ€¦" she told him and looked away from the screen. Even though he was happy she was back, her thinking about Andy hurt.

"Yeah, you should tell them you're ok now" he said.

"I'm calling her right after this, but I think, well, wouldn't it be great to surprise Andy?" she asked. Seth suddenly went wide eyed.

"Uh! That might not be a good idea, I mean, you could give him a heart attack, or he might be working hard, orâ€¦ I don't know, he could faint or something" he tried to make excuses.

"Andy Birken has been working very hard these past few days" Riko stepped in.

"He has? Oh, well, umâ€¦ well, I'm sure he'll enjoy seeing me again nonetheless. I can still try right? I just make sure I don't scare him too much. He doesn't faint and he has a strong heart last time I checkedâ€¦ though that was over a year agoâ€¦" she said as she looked at Dare off the screen.

"Umâ€¦ Elenaâ€¦" Seth started to say.

"Hmmm?" she asked him. He didn't want her to be hurt if she showed up to find Andy with another woman. It was on his to do list but he was constantly being knocked out of commission by the mission, by that damned mind defense. It really did a number on him with just glancing strikes.

"I think I need to tell you something" he said.

"What's up?" she asked smiling. He hesitated and looked at Riko. She brought up a holographic file of Andy. He was getting married. Today in less than two hours. Seth was stunned.

"What the fuck?" He asked astonished as Elena looked confused.

"Is something wrong? Is this a bad time? I'm sorry, I didn't know you were-" she tried to say.

"No! No no no, I mean, uhm, well, uh, nothing's wrong! Shitâ€¦" he said as he looked around his quarters for nothing in particular.

"We gotta fucking stop that wedding!" Seth whispered.

"Wedding? What wedding?" Elena asked. Seth cursed again.

"Fuck, she has modified ear drumsâ€¦" he swore. He forgot about her augments.

"Is something wrong Seth? Seriously, you can tell me, I swear I can keep a secret, unless it's work related" she asked. He didn't want to see her face frown when he told her. He felt an invisible knife jab at his heart and twist.

"Well, umâ€¦ you seeâ€¦ oh fuckâ€¦" he trailed off.

"Seth, please, is it about Andy? Is he hurt?" she asked worriedly.

"Noâ€¦ he'sâ€¦ wellâ€¦ you were gone a long time Elenaâ€¦ heâ€¦ well, remember that promise you made him do? I found out about it from your mother. He told her. Do you remember it?" he asked softly. She went silent and looked at the controls in front of her and furrowed her eyebrows, and then looked up at the screen again and at him.

"You mean, where if one of usâ€¦ oh noâ€¦" she said softly.



"Yeah. There's a woman with him right now. They're getting marriedâ€¦ todayâ€¦" he told her. Her eyes went wide.

"Oh godâ€¦ uhâ€¦ I have toâ€¦ uhâ€¦ whaâ€¦ when?" she asked looking around at nothing.

"In two hours. Elena, If you want to stop it, you have to leave now. Talking to your mother can wait. I'llâ€¦" he sighed and looked at Riko. She nodded.

"I'll meet you on the ground and get you there personally if I have to. Don't worry, everything will be fine" he said and made up his mind. He'd get her to Andy. He'd dump the other girl and hold Elena in his arms again, and they'd live happily ever after. And he'd go back to being a spook in an ice box.

He had to. For her. She deserved it.

(Author's note: Elena is back in action now, but she has a lot to try and fix and figure out now. Poor Seth. That's all I have to say.)

## 7. Lost Love

\*\*[1030 Hours, March 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, \*\*\_\*\*Conundrum\*\*\_\*\* Hangar]\*\*

"Elena, Elena!" Dare yelled as Elena shot into the hangar with a small pack. It was basically a few pairs of clothes just in a case while she was down below. She had to go.

"Don't try and stop me Veronica" she told her as she threw her bag into the pelican and saw the pilot looking worried.

"You can't go! You haven't been cleared medically yet!" Dare told her.

"Fuck that! I have to! I have to let Andy know I'm alive!" she yelled at her.

"So call him!" Dare replied.

"He's about to get married Veronica, he's not picking up any phones!" Elena yelled.

"Have you tried?" Dare asked. Elena picked up her cell phone, which was MILSPEC, and dialed. Voice mail.

"Shitâ€¦ you aren't cleared to go Elenaâ€¦ you can'tâ€¦" Dare told her.

"You can't keep me here Veronica, please, I'm begging you, I'll fucking pull rank in a heartbeat to go down myself, you know I can fly a pelican" Elena pleaded.

"If you're not physically well yet I can override rank" Dare told her softly. Everyone watched in silence. Elena was about to burst into tears.

"Doctor Svoyeh, clear Brigadier General Elena Gripen medically please" she said over the coms.

"But ma'am, she has to-" the woman on the other side tried to say.

"You said she's physically fine right? Then clear her" she ordered.

"Understood ma'am. She'll be clear" the voice on the other side said.

"Thank you" Elena replied and got into the pelican. The pilot turned the thing on and was loaded past the first bulkhead door. She waited in the back as the pelican shot out and headed down.

\*\*[1110 Hours, March 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Moffett Airfield]\*\*

The RORO doors opened and Elena jumped out with her bag. She looked around and saw Seth sitting there mounted on a Hayabusa Mk VII motorcycle. He had a spare helmet for her and a spot for her bag.

"We're riding that?" she asked.

"Do you know anything that can get us there faster than flying? They won't let us fly in that section, I already checked, so your personal pelican won't work" he told her as she locked her small bag to the motorcycle and took the helmet.

"You know how to ride these?" she asked.

"I've used them for a while, almost as long as I've had my job" he told her through his helmet.

"We have barely an hour to get there before it starts" she told him.

"We'll get there. I'll make sure of it. I've never let you down before have I?" he asked softly.

"No. You haven't" she replied and held on tight to him. He revved the engine and shot out of the gates like a bullet, accelerating to 300mph and tearing across the road. They reached the main road and slowed down just enough for him to turn and shot back up to 300 and headed off towards La Balleza de Dios Chapel.

Andy stood at the altar as the music started. His best man was at his side as the maid of honor was opposite and the brides maids stood on the other side of the groomsmen. He waited with a huge smile on his face as his best man made small chit chat while the wedding started.

Seth weaved through traffic quickly, the whole reason he chose a motorcycle being to get between cars and shoot by everything. They both briefly heard a siren that quickly died off. There was no way it would catch them, and even if it did, they'd bypass the arrest with a few calls. Elena held on as tight as she could as her hair whipped

behind her just under the helmet.

The doors slowly opened to the chapel and the bride walked forward with her father as everyone stood up. He walked her forward down the path and to the altar, and gave her to Andy. He nodded and took her hand as the father went to stand beside the bride's mother.

"Please be seated" the priest said as he stood there.

Seth shot through multiple green lights and zipped through one red, ignoring them. Elena nearly closed her eyes as he was being reckless and careful at the same time. He clearly had experience with the two wheeled vehicle as he took a turn close to the ground and still held his balance with her on it.

"The step which you are about to take is the most important into which human beings can come. It is a union of two people founded upon mutual respect and affection. Your lives will change, your responsibilities will increase, but your joy will be multiplied if you are sincere and earnest with your pledge to one another" the priest said as Andy held hands with Jessica. She smiled up at him with her blue eyes as he smiled back.

"We're almost there. You ok?" he asked. She was leaning over his shoulder watching as he drove the motorcycle like an artist. He was really good at it.

"How did you learn to do this?" she asked.

"Can't tell you. Special classes I took, and that's all I can say" he replied as he moved around another car with ease.

"Andy Birken, will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, and forsaking all others, keep you only unto her, for so long as you both shall live?" the priest asked.

"I do" Andy replied softly as he gazed into Jessica's eyes.

"Jessica Sanford, will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, and forsaking all others, keep you only unto him, so long as you both shall live?" the priest asked.

"I do" she replied. They both smiled at each other.

"We only have five more minutes!" Elena said worriedly.

"Relax, we're almost there" Seth told her. They only had two more streets and they'd be right in front of the Chapel.

"Take hands and repeat after me: I Andy Birken, take you, Jessica Sanford, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, to love and to cherish, from this day forward" the priest commanded.

"I Andy Birken, take you, Jessica Sanford, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, to love and to cherish, from this day forward" Andy said.

"Now repeat after me: I Jessica Sanford, take you, Andy Birken, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, to love and to cherish, from this day forward" the priest commanded.

"I, Jessica Sanford, take you, Andy Birken, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, to love and to cherish, from this day forward" Jessica said to him.

"Almost" Seth growled as they were just about at the Chapel, only a block away.

"Do you have a ring for the bride? Please place the ring on the bride's finger and say: With this ring, I thee wed."

"With this ring, I thee wed" Andy said softly as he put the ring on Jessica's finger.

"Is there a ring for the groom? Please place the ring on the groom's finger and say: With this ring I thee wed."

"With this ring I thee wed" Jessica replied as she put her ring on Andy's finger.

"Let these rings be given and received as a token of your affection, sincerity and fidelity to one another" the priest said.

"In as much as Andy Birken and Jessica Sanford have consented together in wedlock and have witnessed the same before this company, and pledged their vows to each other, by the authority vested in me by the State of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss" the priest smiled and backed away as Jessica and Andy kissed each other tenderly.

Seth pulled up to the side of the street as Elena jumped off quickly and threw her helmet off and ran up the steps. She pushed open the double doors of the chapel and ran in.

"Seth, something's offâ€¦ I don't thinkâ€¦ I'm reading a note someone had sent in an email that Tachi interceptedâ€¦" Riko said over his ear mic.

"Little busy right now" Seth whispered as Elena adjusted to the sight inside. She ran forward and opened the inner chapel doors.

What she found was not what she was expecting.

The place was empty, and each pew had a few bouquets of flowers attached, with some papers lying on them. One man was cleaning the area as she walked slowly forward toward the altar. Elena looked around at how extravagant the chapel was. The place was huge, with gold shown everywhere and mosaic glass in almost every window. Candles were slowly burning away.

Seth came up the stairs after turning off the motorcycle right after her. He saw her standing there, alone, with no eyes wondering why she had burst in.

"Ma'am, are you here for the wedding?" the janitor asked.

"Yes, has it started?" Elena asked him.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but it's ended. It finished up about two hours ago. Got pushed up because of some such flight they would catch after the reception" he replied. Elena was stunned. She didn't move at all as her face looked blank for a minute, processing the information. They were too late, way too late. He was married, and most likely heading off on their honeymoon.

Seth stood at the door with his mouth agape.

"Oh no!" Seth whispered as she slowly turned around and looked at the altar and then at the pew near her. She saw a picture on one of the papers showing Andy and Jessica holding each other. She slowly sat down as Seth walked up to her.

"No!" she whispered as she picked up the paper and stared at it, her eyes bubbling with tears.

"I tried to tell you Seth, the time frame was pushed up due to a pilot transfer and error in the schedule, so they had to move it. The honeymoon was planned for Roost!" Riko said quietly over the bone mic.

Elena just sat there as the paper fell from her hands, not moving for anything as Seth sat down next to her. Tears just started falling from her eyes. The love of her life was married to someone else. He had moved on. And she was left behind.

Seth watched her as she started to cry.

"We were too late! god this can't be happening! it isn't real! tell me it isn't real" she said looking at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but he didn't have any words. He always had words to comfort her in some way, change things. Not now. He was trained so well he could think on the fly to counter any negotiations problem in GRID. He had no idea how to help now.

Seth just put his arm around her shoulder as she cried and she leaned in towards him. He just hugged her close as she sobbed.

"Shhh! everything is gonna be ok, don't worry Elena!" he whispered at her as he rested his chin on her head and rubbed her back gently. He really didn't know how to fix this. A few thoughts shot into his head, like getting the marriage annulled or even going so far as assassinating Jessica. He couldn't do that, he couldn't kill an innocent because they were in love and thought Elena was dead.

"God I can't believe this is happening!" she sobbed into his chest as he held her.

"Everything is going to be alright, I promise" he replied quietly as he stroked her hair. She cried for a few more minutes as he slowly got her up and out of the chapel and back to the motorcycle. She didn't really want to move after that, just stood there and waited for something to move her. Seth picked up her helmet and led her to the backseat as he climbed on and she just sat there, not even putting her arms around his waist, still crying and sniffing.

"Come on, let's get settled in at the hotel, you need to rest after everything happening" he told her.

"I don't want to rest, I want to die" she cried as he grabbed her arms and put them around his waist.

"No you don't. You don't want that to happen. You can move forward from this. You always do. Something will fix things, I know it will, you just have to keep that hope" he told her and rubbed her shoulder over his as she laid against his back as he started up the motorcycle and backed it up a bit. He then took off slowly and kept with the speed limit towards the hotel he had thought of. Her mother was in the city, but he figured it would be best if Elena slowly eased into her life again, and didn't intrude on her mother immediately. For all they knew, her mother might have sold the house and moved, as he hadn't had time to check recently. He'd do that once he had Elena resting in a room.

They came up to a large hotel, the Ritz Carlton. He parked the motorcycle as he slowly got off of it and got Elena as well, she acting numb and hard to move, like a doll. She was staring at the ground and still sniffing, most likely crying in her helmet. He pulled it off of her and grabbed her bag and his small one as he walked her in.

"Ah hello Sir and Madam, how may I help you today?" the concierge asked.

"I'd like two" he said as he then looked at Elena. She had said she wanted to die, and might try and perform suicide if he didn't keep an eye on her. He didn't have a psych evaluation on her. He would have to observe and keep her safe until later.

"I need one room with two beds please, not separated" he told him quietly over the counter.

"I understand sir. This is the key to your room, top floor. Will you be needing your bags brought up for you sir?" the concierge asked.

"No thank you, I have them" he replied.

"You have a vehicle parked mayhaps?" the concierge asked.

"Ah yes, a motorcycle out front. Here is the key, the valet can park it right?" he asked.

"Of course sir. Is there anything else you may require? There are complementary robes awaiting and other amenities prepared for you. Do not hesitate to ask for any assistance, and have a pleasant stay here at the Ritz Carlton" the concierge said and smiled.

"Thank you" Seth replied and picked up both bags and led Elena to the elevators. They walked in and went to the top floor and to the room. He unlocked the door and walked her in, as she didn't feel like moving on her own. The place was massive, as he had paid for a very nice room, though it wasn't a penthouse suite. He dropped the bags down on the ground as he led Elena over to a bed and sat her down.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her. She didn't respond.

"Look, I'm sorryâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I didn't knowâ€¦ the time table got moved up andâ€¦ god this is fucked upâ€¦" he tried to tell her as he had his hands on her shoulders. She looked over at a small bar lining the wall. Her eyes and nose were red from crying and sniffing, and luckily she wasn't wearing any makeup or it would be smeared.

"I just want to forgetâ€¦" she suddenly said quietly.

"Ok, ok that's fine. What's happened has happened, it can go in the past. Don't worry Elena, you just move forward. Hey, you can do that right?" he asked. She looked at him, or through him, he didn't seem to know which. She slowly nodded.

"I can't believe he did itâ€¦ I never thought he'd have to keep the promiseâ€¦" she said as he cupped her face with his hands.

"Things happen for a reason sometimes, other times its just bad luck. This might have happened for a reason. Maybe, maybe he wasn't the right one you know? I mean, this was pretty quick. One day he's mourning you, the next he's planning a wedding this quick? They must have hit it off really fast" he told her. He suddenly felt like those were definitely not the right words to say to her. Nothing seemed like the right thing to say to her.

"He moved on without meâ€¦" she whispered "I'mâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I hope he's happy at leastâ€¦ I made him wait for so longâ€¦" she almost choked out.

"Alright, ok, you're gonna be fine without him. He's, he's with someone he cares about, and you'll find someone again just like he did. You'll see. Just put one foot in front of the other right? You're a General now. You can do it right?" he asked. She looked at him and then at the bar.

"You're right. I can do that" she breathed deep as he nodded and stood up to grab the bags and bring them to the bed. As he turned around he saw Elena had gone to the bar across from her and grabbed a glass and poured it full of tequila.

"Whoaâ€¦ uhâ€¦ that's moving forward, but not the way I was expectingâ€¦" he said confused as she took a gulp.

"Hey, easy there" he said as he pulled her glass down from her mouth.

"You said it yourself, it's fine if I forget. He won't stop me. I can move forward, I just need to calm down and think" she told him and she struggled with his grip. Despite him being lean, he was definitely well toned, and was more than likely as strong if not stronger than Andy was. He might not have been as large in build, but he was more than likely far more limber and agile, and most definitely well trained. Soldiers tended to go through basic training to act as infantry, pilots or anything assigned needed to their combat role. Agency operatives had to learn a far wider assortment to do their jobs, often cross training in case of emergency, especially Black Ops like Seth was.

He let go as she took another gulp and breathed.

"Just don't get alcohol poisoning ok? You never drink like this, you never drank like this when you lost your father" he told her.

"And what if I did? It'd be my choice, not yours" she growled. Seth looked at her in confusion.

"Hey, I'm not the enemy here Elena, sorry if you think that way, I'm trying to help you" he tried to explain. She took another gulp and swallowed it. Too much too fast and she'd be drunk in no time.

"I don't need help right now! I need to think and settle down. Please, just leave me alone, I'd like to be alone" she growled. He backed off with his hands up in surrender and grabbed the bags. He brought them to the beds and opened his on top of the bed he chose, which was closer to the window. He at first thought if she went hysterical she might try for the door and just run somewhere, anywhere, but then figured if she indeed chose suicide she might try and jump off the balcony. With him being closer to it, he'd be able to intercept her.

He heard another gulp as he looked over his shoulder at her. She seemed to be calming down. Over the next fifteen minutes she just drank as he pulled out his clothes and checked on the sidearm he always kept buried at the bottom, two different IDs, a data pad and a spare bone mic along with a key spoofer.

"You should drink it slower or it'll hit you like a sack of bricks" he said over his shoulder.

"I said I just want to be left alone! What do you care?" she asked and she turned. This was why he didn't want her to drink. She had done it once, and despite her normally being a happy drunk, if something had pushed her buttons and frayed her nerves, she could turn into an angry drunk just as easily.

"I'm just trying to help Elena, just calm down" he replied and tried to back off again.

"You are always just trying to help. You just tried to help by bringing me here and every time you just tried to help in the past it always screwed me over! You always half assed something when it came to me or missed some key thing! God damn it, you said you knew about this before? Why the hell didn't you do anything!" she yelled at him, and he could tell the tequila was working through her.

"I'm sorry, I was a little busy with trying to save you, it wasn't that high on my priority list" he told her earnestly.

"Oh, so my survival was that high to you? Figures you'd look at it logically. I have no life unless Andy is in it! We were supposed to get married!" she yelled at him. He knew she was quickly getting drunk, not just buzzed, she was already past that with the hard liquor in such a short time.

"I know that! I know ok? But marriage becomes moot if you shot after him with an alien fighter to cut him in half!" he growled back. Sometimes reasoning made an angry drunk think about what they were saying, and sometimes they would just fight. Elena was never really



one to attack anyone, she just mouthed.

"I would never have done that! You clearly don't know me at all! You never did!" she yelled at him. She didn't seem to understand that the crystal would have controlled her actions and made her do whatever they wanted, but her higher reasoning was clearly knocked down and hazy from the alcohol.

"How could I figure you out? I did everything I could to do that and you just ignored me, you just ignored me when I asked questions" he told her.

"How the fuck did you try and figure me out when you hardly were around? You just disappeared all the time when others showed up." The argument was getting heated as she sauntered over to him and he could see the alcohol was definitely working her into drunkenness. It was a bad idea to have let her drink to take her sorrows away.

"It's called after school classes Elena, you did them too remember? Dancing? I took Muay Thai kickboxing! I offered to let you see some of the matches or the training! You ignored the offers to go see football!" he told her astonished.

"And you expect me to like seeing two grown men beating on each other? I'd rather not see you get a fist to the face, or maybe that's more enjoyable to you than hanging with friends!" she said annoyed and shook her head around, but she clearly was having a bit of difficulty with her balance and sat down.

"Like Football was any different for Andy! He would get hit just as much being a fullback! I just came to school with bruises and cuts!" he told her.

"At least he tried to stick with the group! Nothing was more important to him than friends or me! He skipped lessons to stay with us! You would just rather finish what you did, and hoped others would understand. No one could understand you Seth! You're impossible to figure out! You were just the odd ball of the bunch! No wonder I stuck with Andy!" She yelled right at him. That hurt. He was silent. He just looked at her, blankly. She was breathing heavy as she glared at him, the words not really clicking in her head until a few seconds later. She slowly calmed down as he looked away from her, a hurt look on his face. The words sunk into her brain of what she said.

"Your right. I was the odd ball out of it all. I was never good enough for you. You knew it, I knew it. Was stupid of me to try right? I'm sorry. I always screwed it up for you" he said quietly. She just looked at him as he walked to the bathroom with a spare set of clothes and closed the door. She just tore his heart out with one strike.

Seth took a shower and got out, drying himself off as he looked at himself in the mirror. His shorn close brown hair was still slightly wet, and his brown eyes locked onto the scar just under his left collar bone, containing his pacemaker and defibrillator. He was the odd ball. His heart conditions would be considered defects by others outside of GRID. He was lean compared to the muscles Andy had, and he didn't have the striking eye color and blonde hair the fire fighter had. His family wasn't rich, and his classes outside of school weren't sports or particularly noteworthy to anyone unless they got

into a fight, which they never did.

He got his clothes on and put his towel on the rack, and then walked out of the bathroom to see Elena was sitting, thinking on his bed's edge. She looked up at him, knowing what she did. He had always tried to help her, no matter what. Nothing he did was ever good enough for her when Andy was far more risky in trying to get her to like him. Seth played it safe, while Andyâ€¦ there was a reason he was a fire fighter. He liked saving people and enjoyed the thrill of doing it. Seth did his job because he was especially suited for it and because he didn't like the lime light. Apparently, there was a part of Elena that enjoyed that lime light, as Andy had fawned over her when they were together. Seth tended to listen to her carefully, and didn't like being noticed very much. It must have made Elena back away.

They didn't speak as he turned on the TV and checked through news channels. He only ever watched the TV when there was something important on. Nothing seemed interesting aside from a few political actions that Seth seemed to write down on his data pad, as Elena literally just kept glancing at him, almost ready to say something to him but then thought better of it.

He walked out to the balcony and sat down in a chair, and decided to meditate. It calmed him down, allowed him to focus and allowed him to concentrate better. It also was helping with the wound Elena had just torn open. She could apologize even now, and he'd accept it, but it was still there. He thought she was right.

Both of them could hear some arguing down below from another balcony between a man and a woman, something involving her flirting with some other guy. She denied it and asked if he was overreacting, that the other man was just a friend. Seth heard a slap and looked to the door. The man started yelling at her as she cried below. Elena watched him walk from the balcony towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Stay here" he told her as he picked up the key spoofer from his bag and pulled his pistol. She looked at him with wide eyes, still drunk but at least understanding what he was doing. He opened the door and walked out and stormed down the hallway, to the stairs. It was far more controllable than an elevator. He ran down them and to the floor below their room. He entered into the hallway and reached the room he knew they were in. Elena wasn't the only one with X-ray lenses. He pulled the spoofer and placed it, as the door suddenly opened by its use. The thing was designed for military code, and a hotel door was child's play for it. He opened it up and stormed in as the guy punched the woman and she fell.

"I didn't do anything! Stop this! Please!" she cried as he glared at her.

"You fucking whore! You do this to every guy you say your friends with!" he yelled at her. He suddenly had his left arm pulled outwards and a fist slam into his chin from under it, as Seth punched him and kicked his knees, sending him into a kneeling position. Elena had tried to follow him and arrived just in time for the first strike. Seth shoved his own arm over the elbow joint of the man's left arm and suddenly bent the arm inwards, causing damage to the elbow and

then ramming the side of his fist into the man's face. The man flopped on the ground as Seth held his arm still locked.

"Call the police ma'am, I have him" she told him. She was crying and staring at him in awe as she nodded and grabbed the phone. Seth looked back and saw Elena focusing on him as his moves were quick and efficient to subdue. They were special forces moves.

\*\*[Ten minutes later]\*\*

Seth gave a statement to the police before the woman as they led the man away. Seth's statement was halfway false, saying he was staying here to see his sister and heard the notice. The door was unlocked it seemed and he tried to calm the man down but he threw the first punch. The woman had accepted the statement and agreed on it, as he probably had saved her life. The police left but told him they might need to ask him further questions though it was doubtful. He nodded and led Elena back to their room. He sat back down on the balcony as he heard the sound of traffic from below, and continued to meditate.

"I'm sorry" Elena suddenly said. Seth didn't respond.

"I said I'm sorry, about what I saidâ€¦ I didn't mean it" she told him softly.

"Yeah, you did, but whatever, you're right" he told her and went back to meditating.

"No, I'm not right! I didn'tâ€¦ Iâ€¦" she tried to find the words, but she was still intoxicated.

"Yes, you are, don't fret about it, we both know it's true. Just sit down and do what you want, I'll leave you alone, so don't worry" he told her.

"I don't want to be aloneâ€¦" she said softly. He opened his eyes and saw her sitting across from him on the balcony, staring at him. She really was difficult to hear move, even with her being drunk.

"Then sit out here, I don't care anymore. I'm just tired. Andy won, but he's with someone else now. I won't bother you anymore. I'll stay here until you settle down, get things sorted, and move back upstairs. This odd ball won't worry you anymore. I'll disappear for good this time" he told her. Even in her intoxicated state, she understood what he said. It looked like it hit her like a ton of bricks. He was leaving once she was in good enough shape to make it on her own. She watched with her mouth agape in shock as he went back to meditating. He was done. The wound closed itself, and he was done with her. Even with him sitting there across from her, she was alone because of what she said.

As she figured it would be best to leave him alone while he meditated or risk making him angry from some other stupid thing she said, she decided to just sit there, and eventually fell asleep from everything that happened in such a short time.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Elena woke up to find she was tucked into one of the beds, and Seth

wasn't anywhere to be seen. She looked around the room. Had he left? Did he really leave her? She hoped that he didn't decide to leave immediately after she was asleep instead of what he had told her. She had to fix what she had said, somehow.

She slipped out of the bed and saw his bag was still sitting near his. She looked in the bathroom and he wasn't there. She wondered if he might have gone somewhere to think.

"Godâ€¦ I am such an idiotâ€¦" she whispered to herself. She knew she was drunk at the time, and that some things she had said were hazy, but those words had stuck in her mind. She had told Seth off in a way that made him no longer want to be her friend. She had hurt him so much that he would completely abandon her once she was back on the Conundrum. She didn't want that to happen.

She thought back on her life now that she had a chance to sit and really think about things without her nerves and emotions controlling her. She had barely gotten into high school when she met Seth, and he seemed very nice to be around there, always willing to help her with anything she needed. Whenever she asked a question, he would find some way of answering it for her, never giving up, completely focused on doing it as long as it was for her. He was always quiet and let her speak most of the time, listening intently and seemed to always understand what she was talking about, even if she was just bitching and moaning about a teacher and homework. He didn't usually give much commentary, and watched his words carefully around her.

Andy on the other hand was very up front once they were in high school, and had competition with Seth. She really liked Andy, but wasn't really sure if the feelings were just a crush or she really liked him. Seth seemed to have all the answers, or at least tried to for her, while Andy would try and make her not worry about getting the answers each time, simply just go with the flow. Both were patient with her, but Andy took risks while Seth didn't. Andy would always do showy things while Seth kept back and let others take center stage. He always let her look better than he did, even if she was partnered with him in a class. Anytime something came up, it was her idea, not his, though he usually did the research for the answer.

Somehow, she didn't know how, but Andy seemed to feel right for her, while Seth seemed to just want her to be happy. He was reserved, maybe worried he'd hurt her if he took any risks. She suddenly realized that Andy might not have been the right one for her, even though he openly loved her. Seth just did what he could to support her in every way, even when she finally went on a date with Andy, and was always there to talk to when she did find him. He disappeared so much for after school classes, like kickboxing and track and field and math tutoring, but every time she called or asked about him, he showed up. She knew he disappeared because he was needed by those classes, the teams that desperately wanted him to finish a fight competition or win a race. He never wanted to leave her on purpose. People relied on him, and he did what he had to. His job might ask the same thing of him, hence disappearing for six years.

Everything she had said was half assed. She really thought she should never drink again. She said some awful things to him, when he was just looking out for her, like he always did. Andy always figured she could take care of herself after she had come back from her vacation

with her father, like she was tougher than the average girl and didn't need help. It sometimes frustrated her when he stayed out of an argument with another guy at school. He guessed she could take care of herself. Seth constantly stepped in whenever she looked at him oddly. At first she thought it was just overprotectiveness, but he was simply reading her body language. Her looking at him probably meant help. She was asking him for help and didn't realize it.

"Fuckâ€|" she whispered and pushed her bangs from her forehead and shook her head. She just pissed off a man who really cared, and she'd probably never see again if she didn't do something to fix the situation, but if she said anything wrong, it might make the situation worse.

She looked at his bag and saw a small flicker of light come out of it. She peeked into the open zipper to see the data pad had an email on it. She looked towards the door and then at the data pad. She really shouldn't pry into his business. What was his business anyways? He had saved her, but how? Part of her knew it was wrong. His job was not her job, and she knew about sharing classified information. Court Martials were the least of anyone's problems if they knew things they weren't supposed to,

Something in her mind decided somehow, that she should just peek. She knew it was wrong, but her curiosity worked against her. She looked back at the door and then pulled the data pad out slightly and checked the email.

"Seth, Metfield needs an update on Elena's condition. He needs to know if the medical report contained information on any Manchurian candidate effects placed on her. You do psych eval sometimes, can you check her out? â€"Riko."

Elena had heard of Metfield before. He was the department of Security Secretary, which meant that Seth was under him. He was a spy, and from what he was able to do to save her, a top level one at that. He wasn't odd at all, just careful. It was instinctive, practically bred into him. She had no idea how long he had been trained, but it was doubtful he was a spy before he had graduated high school.

She looked through the files that he had on the data pad and suddenly saw one that dated to when she was six years old. He must have been the same age. How could they have a file on him that young? Dr. Wright had a file on her at that age, but she was a special case. Maybe he was as well?

She opened it and looked through it. It was a case report, severely classified, above top secret, and she could tell that there were see through bars almost through the whole thing, heavily redacted to anyone else.

"Subject has been captured from the store near back exit of isle twelve. He has been sedated multiple times until he was taken to the base. It's hard to believe there were two subjects in there at the same time. Subject Gripen was only thirty feet from him when they got a hold of him. Will add further notes once we have gained some more insight into his abilities. â€"Wright"

Elena was stunned. When she was six, she was taken to a store to buy

her first doll, and instead had gained the fighter. Seth was inside that store near her, before she even knew who he was. He was kidnapped, and probably experimented on from what she read. She suddenly felt extremely sorry for everything that had happened to him in the past, and anything that she might have done to him. She would definitely have to have a chat with Daveth.

She noticed there was more in the file, but it was not from Dr. Wright. Someone named Spring, as well as Summer, and Fall.

"Subject wiped the base off the map. They should have known he doesn't like needles. Subject exhibits extreme control over psychic forces. Will have to observe closely once we return him to his family. ONI will not have a chance to do anything to him again. He's our property now. Considerable previous observation involved Temporary teleportation during sleep, movement of objects nearby after waking up or low on sleep, increased metabolism as well as far higher cognitive skills. He exhibits pure photographic memory, an IQ that reaches 200 (though this is inaccurate, he may very well exceed that) as well as quick thinking to adapt to surroundings similar to the subject under Dr. Wright's observation, Elena Gripen. His nervous system has adapted to mitigate pain from any internal sources or brought on by his own body beyond an attack, allowing him to control any mental strain or organ stress, i.e. his heart. His spare pathway allows for faster circulatory function, as well as the tachycardia arrhythmia and bradycardia (Though the bradycardia less of a help due to stopping of blood flow, it does assist in calming him to control his psychic effects.)

All chemical changes will have a significant alteration to what he is capable of once he has reached maturity, though we would hope he would hone his abilities later to match what he is able to do now. We only wish he will live long enough to do that, as most conditions matched together for the heart of a child tend to have a low chance of survival beyond the age of ten."

Elena was utterly dumbstruck. He was a project like her? But for a completely different purpose it seems. Psychic effects? Most of them seemed to happen when he was asleep, which could mean he was in cryo sleep when he had saved her, and not actually on the ship. He was using his mind to do things. She never knew that could even happen, and she didn't think anyone else could believe it either. He was a mind operative.

She noticed the part saying he had wiped out a base when he was younger, and saw a small piece of video footage showing the explosion. Her eyes went wide. He was capable of doing that? No, that was in the past, and the file stated he couldn't continue doing that at an advanced age, though with training could probably match that. No wonder he was Black Ops. He was probably capable of so many other things she could only dream of. She flew better than almost everyone else, but he could see things she could only dream of, be at multiple places almost at the same time like an AI could, manipulate things around him no, not around him, around his mind. She understood because she had read about a previous program long in the past. He was a remote viewer, a remote fighter. No wonder his nickname was Poltergeist. And he wasn't military.

She didn't know what else he could do. Could he read her mind? Could he control her somehow, manipulate her body to do as he pleased? No,

he never showed any of those effects in the past towards anyone. The file had said he did it when he was asleep, so he might only do things when he's asleep or in cryo.

"No wonder he kept away from being noticedâ€¦ he didn't want people to find out and label himâ€¦ like meâ€¦" she whispered. She didn't want others to find out about her augments or they might call her what the Spartans were called. Freak, abomination, wind up doll, toy soldier, the list went on, all derogatory. He was protecting himself the only way he knew how.

The door lock turned off and the door slowly opened as she heard some bumping around, and she quickly turned off the data pad and shoved it back into his bag. She jumped into her bed and pulled the covers over her as Seth seemed to walk in wearing a swim suit and a towel over his shoulder. She had never seen him without a sweat shirt on or long clothes. He was pretty well formed. He probably had to be in his line of work, sneaking around. She had never noticed it, but he had a cybernetic slot on his left arm, with what looked like spots for needles to push into. She slowly sat up from the bed and looked at him as he nodded and then picked up his clothes he had laid on the table. He was still somewhat wet from being in the pool, and he dried himself off quickly at different spots and then pulled his shirt over his head and down.

"You're awake, you must be hungry" he said matter of factly.

"Yeah, I guess I am" she said quietly.

"We can either go out and eat or you can order room service, up to you, or we can go see about your mother" he explained and then grabbed his pants and walked into the bathroom to take his swim suit off.

"Iâ€¦ umâ€¦ can we go out and eat?" she asked.

"Alright, what do you want to eat?" he asked as he came out and put his socks on.

"I don't know, what you do feel like?" she asked.

"I asked you first. I don't much care, food is food to me" he told her. She felt saddened by that. Food to him was probably just energy to keep going now.

"How about Mexican?" she asked. He looked up at her and then back down at his shoes.

"Fine" he said simply. She had remembered at least something about him. Mexican was his favorite type of food. He used to go bonkers for it back in high school. Now, she couldn't tell if he was just doing this because he was still angry with her or if he just didn't care anymore.

"I'm sorryâ€¦ I shouldn't have yelled at youâ€¦ please don't take what I said to heart Seth" she told him.

"We're not getting into that Elena, so just figure out what you want to eat and I'll take you there" he replied.

"I was drunk Seth! I'm sorry! Please, forgive me, I really didn't mean any of it! I was completely talking out of my ass!" she pleaded.

"ENOUGH!" he roared. She fell silent immediately. He was almost always quiet, his voice was either soothing or comforting or made her feel like smiling, but it was the first time she had ever heard him say anything with such command. The sound was like thunder. She had no idea he could produce such a decibel from his vocal cords. He had one hell of a set of lungs when he wanted to.

He finished tying his shoes and stood up, and then grabbed his jacket. She just sat there looking at the floor.

"If you want the food, you should get your shoes on. It is cold out there, so I suggest a jacket, but it's up to you" he told her. He never said it was up to her for a jacket. If it was cold, he always made her bring one.

"Sethâ€¦" she almost whispered and he gave her a glare that immediately shut her up. It was a glare that meant "I do not want this conversation. I am still angry."

She reached for her shoes and put them on, and then grabbed her jacket silently. He opened the door for her and she walked out and thanked him. He didn't respond and closed it, and then walked down the hallway.

"Mexican right?" she asked. He nodded without looking at her. She looked at the floor the entire time they exited the hotel as the motorcycle was brought up to them. She had never been so intimidated by anyone in the past, or felt so guilty about what she had done. She didn't know Seth at all. How could she say he didn't know her when he always remembered her birthday, remembered her favorite food, drink, animal, color, knew she danced Salsa before even Andy did, knew about her pelican and even knew about how well she took temperature changes outside to wear a jacket. He had given her almost as many model airplanes as her father did. Andy always got her mementos to flying, not planes. He knew her alright, and he was a mystery to her.

"Negative, I'm not on standby, on escort, pull another" he suddenly said as he got on the bike.

"Sorry?" she asked. He looked at her over his shoulder and simply pointed at his ear. Bone mic. She opened her mouth and nodded slightly and grabbed the helmet and put it on.

He drove her to a Mexican restaurant that he himself liked, and parked. They both went in and were seated quickly with menus.

"Um, I don't know what's good" she told him quietly.

"Then I suggest you stick with a classic. Enchiladas" he told her as he looked through the menu. She looked up at him but he didn't return the look. She had really hurt him didn't she?

The waitress came and he ordered two sweet corn tamales with rice and beans while she ordered two beef enchiladas. For an appetizer they ordered chimichangas and flautas.



"And to drink ma'am? Sir?" the waitress asked.

"Non-alcoholic beers areâ€¦ I'll have the Granger please" he said. He didn't drink.

"And for you miss?" she asked.

"I'll have theâ€¦" she was going to say margarita, but looked at Seth. If he cared, he wasn't showing it.

"I'll just have a cola" she finally said and the waitress nodded.

"Soâ€¦ umâ€¦ are you taking me to see my mother tomorrow?" she asked timidly.

"If you want. You're technically on medical leave, and I'm escorting you until you return to your ship. You can go where you want" he replied.

"Seth" she started and he gave her that glare again. She had to fight through that.

"I don't care about that glare. I care about fixing what I said. I was an idiot for saying that. I swear, I didn't mean it. I thought it overâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I screwed everything up back thenâ€¦" she told him. He didn't show any change in his face.

"I'm sorry. Iâ€¦ I was drunk and you were there, andâ€¦ I don't know what I was thinkingâ€¦ I really didn't mean it. I'm begging you to forgive me please. I'm never drinking again if that's what I do, attack people who I care about" she told him. She thought he didn't respond, but he closed his eyes for a few seconds, almost in thought.

"Seth, if you know me, then you know I don't apologize unless I mean it. Sorrys never meant much to me when I was younger remember? People said it too much, usually when they broke their promises" she told him. He was still thinking.

"You never broke your promises to me" she finally said as the waitress came with their drinks. The appetizer was brought and they each had two, easily finishing them.

"You eat like I do" Elena said noticing how quickly he emptied his side of the plate.

"No I don't, your metabolism is modified, mine is just this way" he told her.

"Youâ€¦ know about my augments?" she asked. He really was good at getting information, and even knew about the project she was in.

"Yes" he told her simply. He reminded her of the Spartans back when they didn't know how to talk to others, but he was trained to hide information. He was looking at the dessert menu. She suddenly reached across the table to put her hand gently on his and looked at him. He suddenly looked up and was about to pull his hand quickly away, but

he looked into her eyes. She looked hurt.

"I don't want to lose anyone else, please. Not now, not ever" she told him. He looked at her and could have easily pulled his hand away, kept his composure and sent any form of her chance of being happy crashing into the ground at that moment.

He let out a small sigh and looked off at the table. Even though she thought he was still a mystery, she definitely knew that he did that when he surrendered.

"Sorry doesn't really mean much to me either Elena, I should know, in my line of work it's just a word used to stave off someone you're gonna backstab. Actions mean something. You apologize by fixing things in my world" he told her calmly. He wasn't being mean, he was just explaining how it worked for him.

"Your world?" she asked. He sighed again, trying to figure out how to explain it to her. He always did that in the past.

"You're a pilot. Pilots live in a similar world to soldiers. Everything is black and white. You go here, you kill this, you defend this, you don't go here, etc. it's all basic actions. Obvious. I live in the grey, an area where nothing is obvious, everything can be interpreted in a different way, that evil is an opinion and good could mean you just kiss ass too much. It's a lot harder to tell who's a friend and who isn't in my world when anyone can turn on you in a heartbeat" he told her.

"You don't have to worry about me doing that" she told him softly.

"You just did, almost seven hours ago" he told her. She looked at him in astonishment and then pulled her hand away as the food came. He thanked the waitress and ate his food while she thought and picked at her food. She did do that, she could see that clearly. She had to fix things, and he was open now to her fixing it. At least she was getting somewhere.

They finished their food as the waitress came back and asked if they wanted dessert. Seth looked at her for the answer.

"What would you get?" she asked.

"Deep fried ice cream" he told her.

"So one deep fried ice cream?" the waitress asked.

"We could get two if you're still hungry" he told her.

"No, just one, but can you bring two spoons?" she asked. The waitress nodded and walked away. Seth had cocked his eyebrow barely before letting it drop. She wanted to share it.

The waitress brought the plate again, as the deep fried ice cream was covered in layers of fried dough. Elena thought it was a little hard to break the shell, but Seth grabbed her spoon and cracked it at a fault line of the dough layer and the rest just started to break on its own. He handed her spoon back. Still helping her, even when he was trying to act gruff.

They finished and he paid for the food, and then left the restaurant.

"Canâ€¦ can we go somewhere? Anywhere, I just don't want to go back to the hotel room. I have to get my mind offâ€¦ wellâ€¦ you knowâ€¦" she told him.

"Do you know where you want to go? I can find whatever you want to do if you give me a hint" he asked. He wasn't being cold anymore, but he wasn't at a friendly smiling level either.

"Hmmâ€¦ movie?" she asked.

"Which type?" he asked.

"Umâ€¦ which one would you want to go see?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter to me, choose one you like" he told her.

"But it matters to me Seth. I want you to choose" she told him.

"I tend not to watch a lot of movies. Most have clichÃ© endings, and poor plots with dumb characters" he told her.

"Ok then, no movie. Thenâ€¦" she looked around and saw lights in the distance.

"Hey, what's that?" she asked. He pulled up a map in his HUD as she literally did the same. He tagged the position in his HUD and she looked at him.

"Did you put that there?" she asked astonished. He cocked his head back in a bit of surprise.

"I forgot, you use the same tracking channels" he told her.

"Wait a minute, you have them too?" she asked almost smiling.

"No, different" he told her.

"How different?" she asked.

"Complete" he told her. She thought for a moment. He hoped she couldn't figure it out, but she did like a challenge.

"You don't have lenses do you? That meansâ€¦ oh my godâ€¦ you haveâ€¦" she trailed off as she realized she was making him uncomfortable. He looked away from her at other people passing by. He had ocular implants, full retinal prosthesis. She couldn't tell, but the eyes in his head weren't his original ones.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean toâ€¦" she said as he continued forward towards the lights.

"It's ok, this is why I try and keep it a secret, I should have learned by now" he told her. She was 0 for 2 right now, as she had made him feel self-conscious of himself.

They both walked down the street a bit to find a fair had been opened

in a park temporarily, with rides and games all around. Elena suddenly grabbed hold of his arm and leaned against his shoulder. She hoped he wouldn't shake her off or pull away, and he didn't, but she could feel the seize up of his muscles when she did it.

"Hey, let's do that" she told him and pulled him towards the entrance.

"I hate these thingsâ€¦ everything is riggedâ€¦" he told her.

"Do you really not want to go?" she asked. He looked at the place and then at her.

"If you want to go, we can go, I'll shut up about it" he told her.

"No, seriously, if you don't want to go we don't have to go" she told him. She really didn't want to make him uncomfortable. For the first time in a long time, she was wondering what he was thinking or feeling, how he worked.

"Ughâ€¦ a few games and rides, but I'm telling you they are so rigged it's not even funny" he told her. She smiled at him and pulled him towards the entrance again, and her smile was infectious, as a small grin slowly crept onto his face before dissipating.

She pulled out her purse and was about to pay for admission when he slipped a credit chit to a man at the booth.

"I can get this" she told him.

"Allow me" he told her. She smirked.

"I'm a Brigadier General now Seth, I think I can pay for a few tickets" she told him.

"I doubt you make as much as I do, even with your rank" he told her and she actually saw him smirk.

"Really? By chance, could I guess?" she asked.

"Probably, but I may not tell the answer" he told her.

"Oh come on" she said as they got the tickets and walked in. They each got a black light stamp on their hands and a wrist strap for unlimited rides.

"You got those too?" she asked.

"Yup" he replied simply. She smiled.

"Thanks" Elena chuckled. They walked towards the booths as people milled about and played the assortment of games. There was a water gun game to hit down moving targets, a water board game to hit a specific target and watch as a small doll moved down a water slide on a rail. There was obviously a bottle game to attack with balls and a ring toss.

They first did the water gun game, as Elena was pretty good at hitting the targets, and then Seth did the ring toss and nailed the

middle bottle. Elena watched in surprise as he got his assortment of winning tickets handed to him.

"You have some impressive accuracy" she told him.

"Not a trigger twitch, you have to work your muscles with just the right amount of power, just enough to make it not sail off in the wrong way. Control, temperance, patience" he told her.

They reached the bottle striking game and Elena tried her hand at it. She hit it dead on, but only two bottles fell over.

"Oh come on" she growled and rolled her eyes.

"What did you expect? They're weighted" he told her.

"I didn't know that! Why would they fill them up? You're hitting bottles, not cement bottles" she growled.

"To make it harder for people to win. Rigged" he told her. She rolled her eyes.

"Bad" she responded.

"Lemme try" he said and walked up and grabbed a ball. He took a stance and eyed it carefully. He wound up in a pitcher throw, as if playing baseball, and threw a fast ball right at the middle and right bottle. The middle bottle fell sideways and hit the left one, and the right toppled off the side and sent the whole thing rolling.

"Nice!" she cheered as he was given a large amount of tickets. He folded them up and placed them in a foldable bag he carried in his pocket.

"Any more?" he asked.

"Hey, what's that?" she asked as they reached the fun house and went through it. They moved back and forth near mirrors as she chuckled at seeing her chest get far larger.

"As if I'm not big enough there" she laughed as Seth stood in front of one that made him look like a dwarf.

"Ok, I'm definitely agreeing with this, size does matter. I do not like the weather down here" he said and she laughed hard. He smiled suddenly as he watched her. At least she was having fun and getting her mind off of Andy.

They walked into one room with a spinning floor and padded walls and they both went flying in different directions. Elena rolled and started to literally dance across the side to get near him, but she saw him grab onto one of the side bars near the ceiling and hoist himself up and crawl across it like a monkey.

"Hey, cheater" she smirked.

"Not cheating, using what I have available. Used to this" he said and hung from one arm from the bar. He dropped from it and they continued on as they reached a rotating tube. Elena made her way down it and kept tip toeing all the way, easily keeping with the speed of it with

her agile moves. Seth simply planted his legs one third across and rolled with it, pressing his hands opposite and kept with the motions. She laughed as he went upside down and walked himself down the tube.

"Now you're just showing off!" she chuckled.

"Easiest way to get through a varying balance problem" he told her, and smirked. She rolled her eyes and he actually chuckled. She was hoping to finally hear that, and almost breathed a sigh of relief. They continued out of the fun house and Seth saw a sumo wrestling game.

"Ok, that actually sounds interesting" Elena said.

"You want to become fat and bounce on people?" he asked. She glared amusingly at him and smiled.

"I mean the game itself. I don't ever intend on actually becoming fat. I'd look horrible" she told him.

"I find that hard to believe, but ok" he said.

"I would! I'd be ugly and miserable" she told him.

"Beauty in things merely exists in the mind which contemplates them" he replied.

"Are you saying you think I'm beautiful?" she asked softly.

"You are beautiful, and you will remain beautiful regardless of weight increase, because others have viewed you as such and you know it. It doesn't change anything if you gain any weight, unless you think it does. Truth" he told her. She cocked her head slightly and smiled. He had just complemented her on her looks.

"Just don't let that go to your head and decide to scarf down a whole popcorn stand. Remember you have to fit inside your cockpit" he told her suddenly. She laughed and poked his arm. He chuckled as they walked to the sumo game and were padded up. Multiple other people were padded, and it was a battle royale.

Elena waddled in as another girl bounced against her and she fell over laughing and then got up, as the girl came at Seth and bounced, and he positioned his feet so she just popped off his padding and flopped on the ground. A guy came towards him and bumped into him, trying to get a grip with his padded hands and throw Seth. They were completely safe, and no harm could come to either. Seth lost his balance and tried to fall into the guy and onto him, and they both laughed as they got up and went towards the girls. The man bumped into Elena as she jumped and dropped on the ground and she stayed upright, relearning the weight balance as Seth got into a stance as the girl did the same.

Elena went at Seth and bumped into him from the side, and he wasn't ready for it and she toppled on top of him laughing the whole way. She stayed on top of him as he tried to get up, but with the padding it was pretty hard.

"You win, you win, I surrender" he said as he got up. There was a

play course they could go through with the padding on as well, and they both went through together. Elena nearly belly flopped on multiple parts as Seth was a bit tall and kept hitting things in the air, rolling around them and holding himself up by the wall nets. They were both laughing. One part had a bar move just towards their heads, but Elena was smaller and it went right over. Seth on the other hand, was bopped in the head and he was launched onto his back.

Ooph!" he grunted as he looked at her and chuckled. She helped him up and they crawled over a padded block in the way and rolled over it, as Elena rolled on top of him and then on the ground. They finally got out through a sea of plastic balls and waded through it slowly and fell a few times. The padding was taken off and they just laughed as they left that area.

They went to a cotton candy stand and Seth got her a bag of it, and she kept peeling small tufts of it and eating, savoring the sweetness.

"Having fun now?" he asked.

"Definitely. Thanks" she smiled at him. He bought a hotdog and a soda and got her a cookie. Once they had finished, they went to a bumper car ride and Elena kept trying to hit him while he started his own up.

"Gotcha again!" she laughed as he just smirked and hit the gas. His bumper car was screwy and suddenly took off faster than the others.

"Oh crap!" he said and flipped around and bumped into the side wall. He was like an uncontrollable go kart. He was much faster than everyone else around him and he didn't know how to control the speed.

"Hey, you are too far ahead of me!" Elena laughed from behind him as he turned the corner and slid.

"Not by my want girl!" he laughed and bounced off the wall and ricochet across towards the opposite wall. She was laughing hard as he tried to control his car like everyone else, but his was definitely screwy. He tried to hit another person but he over steered and slid right into Elena.

"Oh hello" she chuckled as he looked at her.

"Hi" he said blinking as he tried to regain his surroundings.

"You ok?" she asked with a slight hint of worry in her voice.

"Yeah, just wondering why this thing thinks it's in the indi 5000" he told her grumbling. He wondered if someone had tweaked the engine. The cars turned off as their fun was over, and they got out and walked to a spinning ride, the Typhoon. It was a spinning three armed ride that also had three three armed attachments on the tips of the first arms. They also spun. They both loaded into it as it started to rotate, and both were desperately trying to keep their vision from blurring. Techno music was playing in the background as it spun.

"Whoa!" Elena just closed her eyes as she was flattened against Seth from the centrifugal force.

It finally stopped and they wobbled out, Seth leaning against a pole as Elena tried to keep her balance and nearly fell over. He grabbed at her and didn't realize that was a bad idea, and went with her. They both laughed as they were both shaking their heads because of their senses being thrown through a loop on the ride.

"What a crazy ride" Elena chuckled.

"Stop the world I'd like to get off now" Seth grumbled as he looked at her and then slowly sat up and pulled himself up the pole. He helped her up as the other riders were doing the same on the ground.

"Wow, that was fun" she chuckled and he nodded.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" she asked and he looked at her as their vision steadied.

"Depends on the question" he told her.

"Interested in going on the Ferris wheel?" she asked.

"Up to you" he replied.

"Fine. I want to go, and you're coming obviously" she said and walked towards the thing smiling. He rolled his eyes and followed. They were both loaded into one pod and then other people were put in the other pods. They slowly rose to the top and then back down again as the rest of the pods were filled. The Ferris wheel started to move as they just sat there.

\*\*[Music: The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus "Your Guardian Angel"]\*\*

"So, please tell me you won't just disappear" she told him. He looked at her.

"I!" he couldn't find the words. He had told her once she was back on board the \_Conundrum\_ that he'd leave and wouldn't bother her again, but that was when he was angry with what she said. Would he disappear again? He didn't know. She was military, and he was GRID.

"Don't, I'm begging you. I lost Andy, I don't want to lose!" If I'm going to understand you at all, you need to give me a chance to do it. You always listened to me in the past, give me the chance to do the same now. Please?" she asked. Seth sighed. He never was good at speaking about himself.

"Alright" he said simply. She sighed in relief.

"Thanks for always looking out for me. I don't think!" I don't think I would have made it nearly as well without you being around." Seth just listened as they both looked out at the high rise of the buildings in San Francisco.

"I had to" he replied.



"No you didn't but I wanted you to" she said softly.

"No I needed to" he corrected himself and her. She looked up at him and he didn't return the gaze, just kept glancing down at her.

"A guardian angel. You should change your nickname" she chuckled and looked outside again.

"Poltergeist sounds cooler" he said grinning and she laughed.

"But Poltergeist means you're not actually here. You are here, you just weren't noticed much. That's going to change. I'll change it. You saw me, now I see you" she said. He looked down at her again as she looked up. He didn't know what to say. She just smiled.

"I won't disappear" he told her.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Pinkie swear" he replied. She put her pinkie finger up and he ringed his own around it. They both chuckled.

Fireworks went off in the distance and they both looked at them. Spinning colors and explosions could be seen as they just watched.

The Ferris wheel lowered them down and they exited the pod after the fireworks show ended. It was getting late. Seth got her back to the motorcycle and got the helmet on as he drove her back to the hotel. He walked her into the hotel room and took off his jacket.

"I had a lot of fun tonight" she told him.

"I'm glad" he responded as he walked over and checked on his data pad in his bag. Elena untied her shoes and put them together near the nightstand. Seth noticed the data pad was shoved under into a fold of a spare pair of pants. He always either put it on the side or on the bottom depending on need of access. He pulled it out and turned it on just as Elena looked up and froze. The file was still open of when he was six. He looked at it and then at her.

She couldn't speak. She didn't know what to say. She had read information she wasn't supposed to. That she didn't have clearance for.

He just looked at her. All of the fun that they had together tonight just came to a screeching halt.

(Author's note: Uh oh. Not a good idea for her to read that I ever heard the line I'd tell you but I'd have to kill you after? Um yeah I worried about Elena now)

## 8. Past, Present, Future

"Seth I" she tried to speak but he just stared at her.

"You read my data pad?" he asked. She had a look of guilt all over

her face, like she betrayed him.

"I'm sorry! I saw it blink and it didn't read muchâ€¦ just the emailâ€¦ andâ€¦ one otherâ€¦" she told him softly.

"This one?" he asked, his voice raising. She gave him a small nod. She had never seen him get angry before, and only twice had she seen him get violent in high school. He had wiped the floor with a few bullies that even Andy couldn't make back down.

"I'm sorry! God I'm sorryâ€¦ itâ€¦ you were sixâ€¦ I just wanted to know more about you that's allâ€¦" she told him.

"You could have asked!" he yelled at her in astonishment. Tears slowly welled up in her eyes.

"I'm sorryâ€¦" she told him again. It seemed to be the only thing she could say.

"Sorry doesn't fix this Elena! Oh fuckâ€¦" he said and looked away from her and sat down on his bed, holding his forehead with his hand.

"I know I can't know about some of that material, and I didn't search through anything beyond those twoâ€¦" she tried to reason with him, somehow lower the catastrophe she had produced with her own curiosity.

"That file has an EBI to only two pairs of eyes! Do you have any idea what kind of punishment is dealt out to people who see these things and aren't clearanced?" he yelled at her.

"Iâ€¦ I could be court martialedâ€¦" she told him.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Court martial is the least of your concerns Elena! It doesn't work that way outside of the UNSC! You could get the death penalty! They could tell me right here and now if they found out to eliminate you!" he told her with wide eyes. She almost stopped breathing, pure shock kicking in. Would he do that? Would he shoot her to contain the information?

"Sethâ€¦ you wouldn'tâ€¦ oh godâ€¦" she said as she sat down on her own bed. She had a thought flash through her mind of him picking up his pistol and aiming it at her head right there and then, and pulling the trigger, her body just falling on the ground as he picked up his stuff and left.

"Oh I wouldn't but it won't stop them from telling me to! And guess what? If I declined, they'd send a wet team! These guys make ODSTs and Spartans look tame! They'd take you out without you even knowing about it, and even with people around they wouldn't know what hit you!" he roared. She almost cringed at him yelling at her. He was really worried.

"I'm sorry ok! I didn't know! I don't know anything! I swear! I just read that one part! When you were six and you asked to check on me!" she yelled back. The tears fell down her cheeks as she stared at him.

"Sorry doesn't mean anything to the people I work with Elena! Jesus,

don't you understand?" he yelled as she could see how scared he was, not for himself, but for her. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as he thought.

"Iâ€¦ how do I fix thisâ€¦ I don't know howâ€¦" her voice quivered as she thought about some sniper aiming at her if she walked around, hitting her right between the eyes. She didn't mean to cause problems.

"I go to a friend and get clearance for this for you; that's the only way. If they decline, I put my own cards on the table and they hopefully back off or consider me enough of a threat to take us both out" he told her. She looked at him in shock. He'd lay his life down for her.

"Whatâ€¦ what cards?" she asked.

"I can't tell youâ€¦ justâ€¦ stay here pleaseâ€¦ you will stay here right?" he asked. She nodded quickly. He stood up and grabbed his jacket and put it on.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"As I said, I have to go do this. Riko could track your fingerprints when you opened that data pad Elena. I fucking forgot to turn the security pass on the last time I used itâ€¦ god damn itâ€¦" he said.

"Could they track me opening the file?" she asked. He nodded. She was in deep shit. This wasn't Precursors, this was her own people thinking she was a traitor potentially. They could track exactly who touched what in the agency he worked for. Anything that happened involving security, they knew.

He sighed and opened the door and walked out. She just sat there as he left. Two hours went by, followed by another, and another. Still no sign of him. It reached four in the morning when he finally came in and saw her still awake and worried. She stood up as he entered. Her eyes looked bloodshot, but she felt a sigh of relief when he came in.

"I got clearance, but only for those two files. We faked a lost background check that passed on you" he told her.

"Fakes a background check?" she asked.

"Yeah, Q clearance. You hadn't been put in the system yet, and with your apparent death a year ago, it never occurred to rush it. I thinkâ€¦ I think you're safe now" he told her. She sighed in utter relief as he put his coat away.

"You cannot do that again, hell, you never will get that chance again do you understand? Do not touch anything that belongs to me that could potentially involve anything I do, got it? You want to know shit, you ask, plain and simple" he told her sternly. She nodded quickly. He really did live in a different world than her. Even Dare probably did what he had to for security purposes, she was still considered military though. He was civilian with a clearance level beyond even Dare, probably beyond Parangosky. He could probably order her to release information for all she knew, considering he was a

security branch officer. Military worked on its own problems, but if it interfered with government or civilian lives, he had a license to kill at will. The military was there to protect the rest of humanity from direct threats. He protected from inside.

Seth walked to his bed and sat down. He looked exhausted. He looked up at her.

"You should get some rest, you should already be in bed" he told her.

"I couldn't exactly sleep until you got back" she replied. He understood and nodded.

"Go on, get some sleep. It's fixed, but please for my sanity and your safety, if you want to know about something about me, you go through me got it? No snooping. It can and will get you killed. This isn't Andy where all you get is a stern talking to or someone angry, this can and will end your life if you do it again" he told her. He needed to scare some sense into her. She nodded and got ready for bed as he took off his pants and his shirt. As she slipped into bed she noticed his scar under his left collar bone, but she didn't say anything. He turned off the lights and got into his own bed.

"Hopefully you sleep well" he told her.

"Thanks" she replied softly as he just laid in his bed and closed his eyes. She just stared at him for a bit before rolling over and going to sleep.

\*\*[1040 hours, March 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, Ritz Carlton Hotel]\*\*

Elena slowly woke up to sunlight outside of the windows. She rolled over and looked around as she blinked away the sleep. Seth wasn't in his bed, and was doing hand stand pushups. She was amazed he had the balance to do it. She sat up and watched him as he lifted one of his hands and lowered himself slowly on just one, and then rose again, and did the same to the other before getting back on his feet.

"Wow" she simply said and he turned around after hearing her. He shrugged and grabbed a towel.

"Morning" he told her.

"Morning" she replied. He grabbed his clothes and went to take a shower as she slipped out of her bed and got up for the day. Once he finished, she went in and took her own shower and blow dried her hair. As she came out, she spotted Seth doing some things on his data pad, but he looked up and suddenly hit encryption controls before turning it off. He was going to be careful from now on. He didn't look at her with annoyance, it was like looking at a child with a gun in the house. Better safe than sorry again.

"Breakfast?" he asked.

"Yeah" she sighed out. He nodded and grabbed his jacket as she grabbed hers.

"I have an idea, if you're interested" he told her.

"Hmmm?" she asked.

"Amber's restaurant" he told her. Her eyes went wide and a huge grin went on her face.

"Oh myâ€¦ I forgot she has one!" her face lit up. He opened the door and they both walked out and into the elevator, and then reached the lobby and waited for the valet to bring his motorcycle.

"After, I thinkâ€¦ I think I should tell my mother I'm aliveâ€¦" she told him. He nodded as the valet came up, and he handed her the second helmet, as he sat down and she held onto his waist. He headed out on the street and drove them straight to Amber's restaurant, Day In Day Out. They parked and Elena walked towards the front door. Seth was hot on her heels as he turned the motorcycle off. Elena looked behind her and at Seth.

"Hey, are you mad at me for what happened?" she asked.

"I'm not mad, I'm worried. What's done is done, and it isn't happening again, right?" he asked her.

"Right" she said and nodded to him. He nodded back. Everything would hopefully be fine between them again.

She walked in and looked around. The place was packed. Not one table was available, and it was breakfast time. Apparently the place was very popular. She walked to the front and a woman stopped her.

"Table for how many?" she asked.

"Uhâ€¦ well, two?" she asked.

"Mmmm, I'm sorry, but it'll be about two hours before we have one available, can you wait?" she asked.

"Uhâ€¦ well, I sort of want to meet the owner of the placeâ€¦" Elena told her.

"I'm sorry, but she's very busy. If you're for a job interview, here is her card for applications" she told her.

"I'm not asking for a job, I know her" Elena replied as she took a step forward and looked around. The waitress stepped right in front of her.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry but we don't have any tables available right now. I don't care how you know our manager, you can't just-" she tried to say as they both heard a crash. Amber was standing in the doorway of the kitchen with a small data pad dropped on the ground and a small plate of an assortment of food, most likely taste testing. She was staring right at Elena.

"No wayâ€¦" she said as Elena just smiled.

"You're dead! You couldn't be! Are you a ghost just coming here to see me?" Amber asked as she walked over to her.

"If I'm a ghost, would that really matter? I'm hungry" she told her chuckling. Amber touched her arm and then immediately took her friend in an embrace. Elena hugged her back as Amber squealed in delight.

"I can't believe you're alive! Oh my god we all thought you were dead!" she said and was almost making a scene in the middle of her restaurant.

"Well, you'd be surprised what you can live through" she replied as Amber pulled away and touched her friend's face and then her shoulder.

"I'm not dreaming am I? You really are here?" she asked.

"And hungry and apparently there are no tables available. It looks like you're really busy, I'm sorry to keep you from what you're doing, we can come by later if you want" Elena told her. Amber grabbed her arms.

"You aren't going anywhere!" she said and pulled her towards the kitchen as Seth stood there at the door.

"Wait, um, I'm not alone here" she told Amber. Amber looked behind her and saw Seth standing there.

"Oh myâ€¦| wow, you found him? I thought he was dead too!" she squealed as she waved. Seth waved sheepishly as the waitress seemed confused.

"Well come over here you idiot! We're going in the kitchen" Amber said and he complied as Elena was led by the hand inside. There was a table further down the kitchen area as multiple chefs moved about cooking.

"So I see you manage more than you cook now" Elena said as she was sat down and Seth stood nearby.

"You, sit" Amber ordered and Seth obeyed quickly.

"I taught them how to cook. Apparently, the chefs at the CIA really thought I had a knack for stuff, andâ€¦| well, I'm sort of a training restaurant if you will" she told them with a hand put over the side of her mouth, emphasizing it was some sort of secret.

"Ah" Elena replied as Seth nodded.

"But that doesn't mean I don't have time for my friends!... wait a fucking minute, you haven't beenâ€¦| don't fucking tell me you've been around for-" she suddenly looked angry.

"I was MIA until a few days ago. Seth found me out there" Elena told her.

"How? They sent ten rescue teams out to find you and they never even got a trace!" Amber looked confused.

"It'sâ€¦| classified" Seth told her.

"Classified my ass! Spill the beans!" she ordered.

"Can't, this really is classified Amber" Elena told her.

"You can't share it with your best friend?" Amber asked looking hurt.

"Sorry. No can do. Iâ€¦ I'm sorry I wasn't there for your wedding" Elena said, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, well, Jennifer sort of filled inâ€¦ really wished you were there thoughâ€¦ we thought of you, you know that? Every day, you never died from our minds" Amber said as tears slowly bubbled up from her eyes.

"Hey, I'm here now, I'm back, don't cry, ok?" Elena asked as Amber brought her hand up to her mouth and worked to not cry.

"I'm sorry, I justâ€¦ god I missed youâ€¦ I am so glad you're backâ€¦ hey, lemme get your order quick to my minions and we can talk ok?" she said and Elena nodded. Amber fought back the tears and ordered an assortment of dishes for them and sat down to talk.

"I am so sorry about Andyâ€¦ he justâ€¦ moved forwardâ€¦ Jessica was a good person, hell, she is one what am I saying? She's a friend of ours now too. I don't know, they justâ€¦ clicked together, like you and he did. And we didn't know that youâ€¦ well, and Andy he wanted to wait for so long butâ€¦ they both were so in love so quick they decided to marry in such a short time" Amber told her.

"Yeahâ€¦ Iâ€¦ we nearly got there, butâ€¦ we were two hours late. Seth had barely found out about it and we justâ€¦ I lost my chanceâ€¦" Elena said trying to find the words as she looked down at her plate.

"I am so sorry it had to happen to you Elena. God, you damn well didn't deserve that. We all thought you were just the greatest couple, you were meant to be togetherâ€¦ but nowâ€¦ Andy and Jessica feel they're soul matesâ€¦" Amber told her.

"Soul mates? Yeahâ€¦ I can see thatâ€¦ I'm happy for himâ€¦ he moved forwardâ€¦ I wish all the best for him" she told Amber and looked down at the ground. Her friend nodded and reached over to hold her hand. Elena took it and sighed.

"I need to head to the restroom" Seth said and Amber pointed him to it. He left the table as Amber and Elena quietly talked.

"Soâ€¦ Seth saved you? I know you can't tell me the details butâ€¦ did he take you to Andy's wedding? We didn't see youâ€¦" Amber asked quietly.

"As I said, we were really lateâ€¦ we didn't know it got moved up. Seth did everything toâ€¦ well... he took care of me yesterday while I lost it. I said a few things to himâ€¦ some bad thingsâ€¦ I really don't feel like I deserve him being nice to me, but I'm trying to fix what I said now, andâ€¦ I don't know" Elena told her.

"Soâ€¦ does this mean you mightâ€¦ well, I don't know. You said you said some stuff and he was mad, and now you're fixing things. Fixing to be friends or fixing to beâ€¦ more?" Amber asked.

"What? Amber, I can barely think about anyone else besides Andy right now. Seth's nice, and he'sâ€¦ he'sâ€¦" she trailed off.

"He's smart, good looking, cares what happens to you and is insanely patient. He's a close second to Andy girl, best grab him before someone else does, all you have to do is fix things and let him know you're interested" Amber told her.

"He's not a close second Amber. Don't ever say that please. He's not second to anybody. He's in his own league. Heâ€¦ he just is" Elena replied as she held her head with her hand.

"Well, do you mean you're not interested or something? Weren't you interested in him before? I mean, fuck girl, he's still a catch. What do you mean own league? You don't feel good enough for him? Cause we could tell you guy's had a connection until you were with Andy" Amber told her.

"No, Iâ€¦ I'm barely holding it together with knowing Andy and I are nothing anymore, andâ€¦ he's helping me get back on my feetâ€¦ he's greatâ€¦ I just see him as a friend right nowâ€¦ maybeâ€¦ well, I don't know ok? I don't know what my feelings are right now. Everything is so mixed up for me I can't figure out what from what" she said as she picked at her food.

"Elena. When you look at Seth, do you feel anything? That's how you can know what at least some of your feelings are saying. I know you hon. If you love him, you need to tell him. I don't know what's really going on cause you guys seem to not be able to tell me, and I respect that, but if you two can be happy together, then that makes all this sadness disappear. Think on that ok?" Amber asked as she rubbed her friend's hand.

"I willâ€¦ thanks" she replied and Amber gave her a comforting smile. Seth came back from the restroom and sat down.

"Hey, I haven't seen you in six damned years! Don't you tell me you were MIA out there too!" Amber growled. Seth blinked and looked at Elena. She raised her hands in surrender.

"Uhâ€¦ work" he told her.

"What work?" she asked probing.

"Hard work" he told her.

"Fuck that, tell me more" she said and stared at him.

"Can't" he replied and started to eat, but she pulled his plate away. He looked up at Elena and then at Amber.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"Yes, you disappeared. You need to stop that. You also didn't answer me in my own restaurant, and I am queen here. What, did you forget you still have friends here?" she asked annoyed.

"Uhâ€¦ I didn't realize you guys really considered me a friend?" he asked and looked down at his food. Amber's eyes went wide.



"What? What do you mean you didn't think you were our friend? You hung out with us! We're a team!" she growled.

"No I didn't, you guys were usually just in the same place I was at the time" he told her. Amber's mouth was agape.

"No we weren't! Weâ€¦" Amber shut up. She thought over all the times they were near each other. Each time he was doing homework or reading or something, and for the most part alone. Their group tended to stumble on him and just hang around nearby while he continued to finish his homework. He'd joke and talk to them, but for the most part continued until he was finished and then got up and left. Now that she and Elena thought about it, they had never once invited him to a party or anything. Elena never asked him to her sixteenth birthday, or her eighteenth, or any other. He was forgotten after Elena had gotten together with Andy. If everything had gone according to plan, he might have continued to be forgotten even now.

"Whaâ€¦ weâ€¦ well thatâ€¦ you're still our friend! Don't you ever forget that! You hear me? You show up often damn it! You call!" she told him.

"Okâ€¦" he replied and looked at Elena in confusion. Elena tried to hide the fact that she really did forget about him sometimes. She really needed to repair their friendship, though from what Amber had said, she could go beyond that. She could move forward too, just like Andy.

"Can I have my plate now?" Seth asked. Amber put it back down and he dug into it.

"How are the others?" Elena asked.

"Marcus and Jennifer are still happily ever after, and he's filthy rich right now with all his designs. He really missed you. You know he funded three of the damned rescue teams that went after you? You made one hell of an impression on him girl" Amber told her. Elena looked at her in surprise.

"I never expected him toâ€¦ wowâ€¦" she said.

"Are you kidding me? Maria prayed they'd find you, I was a wreck, and your mother wasâ€¦ oh, have you seen her yet?" Amber asked.

"She's our next stop" Elena told her.

"You know where to find her. Just head home. It'sâ€¦ really empty with just her there you know? We visit often enough, and she babysits Marcus and Jennifer's kid, and oursâ€¦ she's almost like a grandmother to them" Amber told her, and tears slowly formed but she wiped her eyes.

"Ok, ok, calm down" Elena hugged her friend.

"We really missed you so much. And now you're back. I swear, this is one of the happiest days of my life. Don't you ever go away again, I don't care if you're fighting out there, you come back every time you fucking hear me? Every time!" Amber pulled back and shook her friend by the shoulders, expecting her to agree. Elena nodded and

smiled.

"If I don't do it, Seth will make sure of it" she replied and looked at Seth. Amber looked at him and he nodded. He'd take care of her, always. He had no idea how he'd handle an armada of alien ships, but he'd find a way to keep her safe. He hoped he'd never have to find out how to do it though.

Amber smiled at Seth and he smiled back.

"Good. Knowing him, he'll kick those alien's asses for you with those special moves" she said as she punched at the air. Seth laughed.

"Special moves?" he asked.

"Yeah, thoseâ€¦ Mai Thai moves and that thing you do running on walls" she said. Elena looked at him.

"Running on walls?" Elena asked.

"It's called Muay Thai, not Mai Thai. That's a drink Amber" Seth corrected her.

"Whatever, those other moves though, the jumps and the rolling, that isn't the same is it?" Amber asked. Elena watched him.

"No, that's Parkour, and it isn't fighting. It's a method of movement to get around obstacles with speed and efficiency" he told them.

"So, you're a parkourist?" Amber joked.

"We're called traceurs for your informationâ€¦ parkouristâ€¦ sheeshâ€¦" Seth told her and chuckled. The girls laughed.

"That sounds exotic. So, you jump and run and roll around things?" Amber asked.

"It's about finding the most efficient way around obstacles or through an area without need to do something else that would slow us down. While you might walk down a flight of steps, we would vault over the side and hang, then drop to the bottom and get there quicker than you would taking the longer route. \_Ã¢tre et durer" \_he told them.

"Oooh, french, what does it mean?" Amber asked and smiled at Elena. The smile was definitely telling that Seth knew the language of love.

"To be and to last" he replied.

"Oh, is it like Elena's dancing?" Amber asked and smirked at Elena. She was doing it to try and get them to have even more common ground. Elena could nab her own men she figured, and narrowed her eyes. Amber snickered.

"Not exactly. It is a type of freedom or kind of expression. Parkour revolves around a state of mind rather than a set of actions like dancing does. You overcome and adapt to mental and emotional

obstacles as well physical barriers. It is also a means of reclaiming what it is to be a human being. It teaches us to move using the natural methods that we should be learning to react to our environment. We should touch our world, interact with it, instead of being sheltered by it" he told them. Amber looked at Elena with a smile. She just smiled and shook her head with a sigh.

"That's absolutely awesome. Wow" Amber said simply.

"There was a saying coined by a martial arts master a long time ago. There are no limits. There are plateaus, but you must not stay there, you must go beyond them. A man must constantly exceed his level. If you are not better than the day before then what are you doing? What's the point?" he told them. Amber's eyes went wide as Elena seemed to be blushing profusely. He understood her more than she knew.

"Hey, could we ever see you do that?" Amber asked.

"Uh, aren't we going to see her mother first?" Seth asked confused.

"Come on, just a few moves outside, Elena has done that before in front of us already in the past" Amber said. Seth looked between them and Elena's face lit up.

"So you want me to show off?" Seth asked cocking his eyebrow.

"Come on, dance, please?" Elena asked.

"Fine, alright, a few" he said and chuckled.

\*\*[Ten minutes later]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Jimmy Eat World "My Best Theory"]\*\*

Seth was incredible. He leapt from a staircase and ran down the wall, jumping to the top of a dumpster and rolled off it, the lid closed and rolled right over a car effortlessly. He then took two steps up a wall and jumped to the top, grappling it and flipping himself up, then ran down the top of it and grabbed a tree branch, swinging through the air and landing on a wooden board and slid on it, right in front of the girls. They cheered as he made it across the parking lot faster than they had ever seen, completely bypassing most of the walkways. The walkways would take maybe a minute, but he made it through in less than ten seconds.

"How the hell did you move your weight like that?" Amber asked.

"Same as Elena does with her Salsa. Angle and momentum" he told her. He backflipped multiple times and finally side rolled, kicking his legs in a spin and then landed effortlessly. On the final roll, he was easily ten feet in the air. Elena and Amber gawked.

"That's Parkour. Control your body, and not let your environment do it for you. You limit yourself with your mind, not your body, and that is limitless in its own right" he told them.

"Uh, I am so going to have to learn how to do that" Amber said in

disbelief.

"Ah, so you would become a traceuse" he told her.

"A traceuse? Oh, a female Parkouristâ€¦ I know I said it wrong!" she snapped with a grin. Seth chuckled.

"Hey, why call yourself a traceur?" Elena asked.

"French word tracer, which normally means trace or trail, and we tend to use Parkour toâ€¦ wellâ€¦" Seth trailed off and looked away.

"Ahâ€¦" Elena said.

"Ah what? Hello? Not all of us are military here!" Amber asked looking between them quickly.

"Seth isn't military either. He means he uses it to escape pursuitâ€¦" she said softly. Seth most likely had run from people she had never known existed, all intent on killing him in his missions. He might be able to do what he did to save her, but she had no idea if he didn't do physical things outside of that, and most likely did. Just because he was a remote viewer didn't mean he didn't do things outside of where he viewed. He might do stealth operations or sniping. He might have even assassinated people.

"Escape? What, you get in trouble with the cops or something?" Amber asked.

"No, nevermind Amber. Don't worry. Hey, we should get going" Seth told them.

"Yeah" Elena replied as they said their goodbyes and walked to the motorcycle.

"I'm telling you, you need to grab him" Amber whispered out of the corner of her mouth to Elena.

"Shut up, he can hear youâ€¦" Elena whispered.

"No he can'tâ€¦ we're fucking twenty feet from him, now nineteen, now eighteen" Amber replied.

"Now nineteen? Now eighteen? Yes, we can count Amber" Seth said from his seat on the bike.

"See?" Amber asked. Elena sighed.

"Hey, take care of yourself ok? I'm going to see your mother tomorrow" Amber told her and Elena nodded and hugged her friend.

"Hey, you be nice to her ok?" Amber growled at Seth. He looked at her in confusion while he put his helmet on.

"And you, you be nice to him too" she chuckled and winked. Elena grumbled something incomprehensible and walked to the bike.

"Did I miss something?" Seth asked her.

"Nevermind, it's nothing to worry about, Amber is just being Amber, which is to say she's nuts" she replied.

"Oh, well that's a given" he replied as Amber pursed her lips and her eyebrows rose. They both laughed at her face as she raised a fist at them.

"Bye!" Elena said as he rolled them back and headed out onto the street while Amber waved at them.

"Um, sorry, but it's been six years since I've been to your house. Where is it?" Seth asked her.

"Ha! Alright, go this way" she told him and held onto his waist. She gave him directions as he zipped through the streets and made his way to the house. He parked and turned the cycle off as Elena walked to the front door. Her mother's car was in the driveway, so she was definitely home. She pressed the doorbell and waited as Seth walked up the pathway.

The door opened and Elizabeth looked up and brought her hands to her face in shock.

"Oh my god! oh my baby! You're alive!" she said and hugged her daughter.

"Hey mom! yeah! I made it back!" she said in her ear as she hugged back. Her mother was crying as she held her for a minute before breaking away and holding Elena's face.

"We missed you so much! My poor girl! God I can't believe this is happening! You have no idea how happy I am!" she cried out as she hugged her again and then pulled away one final time.

"Yeah, surprises happen often these days. How are you doing mom?" Elena asked.

"I am doing so much better now that you are here! Come in come in! Oh!" she said as she looked behind Elena and saw Seth there.

"Hey" he waved.

"Well I'll be. I haven't seen you in ages! You know about Elena being alive?" she asked.

"He saved me mom. He got me back here. You should thank him for getting me here" she told her mother. Elizabeth looked at Elena and then at Seth.

"Thank you so much. Truly, you're a miracle worker" she told him with tears still in her eyes.

"You have no idea how many times I get that!" Seth said as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"It's true! You're an angel looking out for her!" Elizabeth told him.

"Eh, my horns are holding up my halo, and I hide my pointed tail" he

chuckled.

"I wouldn't believe it for a second! You come over here, I'll make us some coffee" she said and ushered Elena and him inside.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena and her mother talked for a long time, as Seth just kept out of the conversation. He really didn't know how to respond to her mother at all.

"God, you must know about Andy nowâ€¦ oh my poor babyâ€¦" Elizabeth said as she held her daughter's hands.

"Yeahâ€¦ I guess I do know nowâ€¦ but I'm happy for him after thinking it over. I know it's only been a day since I found out, butâ€¦ well, I hope they stay happy together" she replied. Elena looked down at her hands and realized she didn't have the engagement ring anymore, or the necklace. They must have been taken from her when the Precursors had her body.

"I'm glad you can move on sweetheart. Just take one step after another, and you'll get through this. Everyone supports you" her mother told her.

"Thanks" she replied.

"Now, um, where are you staying? You aren't leaving immediately are you?" Elizabeth asked and looked at both of them.

"Uh, well, Elena is on medical leave right now, so, I'm just making sure she doesn't keel over in some form" Seth told her.

"Medical? Are you hurt?" Elizabeth asked worriedly.

"No no, well, not physically it looks like. It's just safety protocol. I'm fine, really mom, nothing is wrong" she said with a smile.

"Well, alright, if you say so. So you aren't leaving for a bit?" her mother asked. Elena looked at Seth and he shrugged.

"Up to you" he replied.

"Well, we're staying at a hotel right now in the city" she replied.

"Oh" her mother said simply.

"Oh? What's oh?" Elena asked.

"Well, I thought, well, you could stay here. You don't have to spend oodles of money to stay in the city you grew up in. Your home is here, always, until you officially move out of course" her mother chuckled.

"Mom!" Elena said, feeling embarrassed that she was still living with her mother at the age of 25. She hadn't been there for a year obviously, but she hadn't moved out on her own, a Brigadier General living with her mommy.

"Oh it isn't such a big deal you lived here, it was nice to have you and not have this big house go to waste. I haven't done anything to your room after youâ€¦ wellâ€¦ you knowâ€¦" Elizabeth trailed off.

"But I'm here now, and I'm not dead. Are you sure it's ok?" Elena asked.

"Of course it's ok! Where are your things, I hope you're staying for a bit this time and not shooting off somewhere" Elizabeth said.

"That may very well be the case soon Ms. Gripen" Seth told her.

"Mrs. again" Elizabeth smirked. Elena blinked.

"Wait, Mrsâ€¦ what? You andâ€¦ you got remarried?" Elena asked astonished.

"Yup. Your father and I, after this whole ordeal, we decided, well, that we needed to cherish what we had still around us, and when he stayed here while you were gone, well, it rekindled how we felt. He's still flying, but he pulls shore leave every chance he gets to come home now." Elena was happy for her. She had no idea that they had gotten back together.

"That's fantastic news Ms. Griâ€¦ Mrs. Gripen" Seth suddenly corrected himself.

"Thank you Seth. Now, where are your things? You still have clothes here remember, so it's not like you are missing much in your hotel room" her mother told her.

"I'll go get her stuff and bring them over" Seth said and got up to head to the door.

"Are you staying in the same hotel?" Elizabeth asked.

"A two bed hotel room. He wasâ€¦ well, he was looking out for me when I found out about Andy" Elena said and smiled up at Seth.

"Well then, thank you for taking care of her during such a difficult time. You're a good friend to her" Elizabeth commented.

"Um, thank you ma'am" Seth replied awkwardly.

"So you'll be getting your things too?" Elizabeth asked.

"Um, sorry, what?" Seth asked.

"I said, you'll be getting your things as well right? You can stay in Milo's old room, he moved out a long time ago. Obviously you have to stay to continue keeping an eye on her." Elizabeth smiled, but there was a slight hidden meaning behind it.

"Well, I mean, I don't want to be a bother, and you and your daughter need time to catch up, I don't want to get in the way of anything" he replied. Elizabeth glared at him as Elena giggled. Seth was pulling

his instinctive "I would like to disappear and not be seen" reaction towards her.

"Don't you dare! You are staying here and that's that! I will not have the knight in shining armor who saved my daughter staying in a hotel room while there's a perfectly good room right here! Besides, which hotel did you stay at?" Elizabeth asked.

"The Ritz Carlton" Elena replied. Elizabeth gawked.

"You stayed there? It's like two thousand a night! No, absolutely not, it's settled by me, you stay here and stop burning your money" she said and waved her hands in front of her and shaking her head.

"Um, ok, thank you very much ma'am" Seth replied. He looked at Elena confused. Knight in shining armor? There were now two people who called him that, and he didn't like it. He always had this idea of knights not being these glamorous men saving a princess, but these weird clunky guys that could barely move on their own, were easy to see, very easy to get a flanking maneuver on, and were heavy. Add in the fact that they couldn't see well out of their knightly helmets, and he would much rather have been the well paid and experienced food soldier with chain mail. Or the assassin.

"My name is Elizabeth! You will call me by my first name Seth!" she growled.

"Sorry ma'am—er, Elizabeth" he said and looked like he was in front of a firing squad. Elena just giggled.

"Good. Well, go get her stuff, and I'll go get this place bustling. I am so happy there are people here again, gets me off my duff to do things again. Amber and Marcus should bring their families over tomorrow. They consider me their surrogate grandmother to the kids; sweet of them. But now, I wholly expect you to give me some grandkids later on young lady!" Elizabeth told her.

"Mom! I'm still—well, mourning or whatever you call it! I can't think about that right now!" Elena said and looked at Seth for help. Seth backed off. He never did that. First time for everything.

"Help!" She said to get him to jump in.

"Uh uh, he doesn't get a say in this, or does he?" Elizabeth smirked and looked at Seth.

"I'm getting the bags now ma'am, bye" he said and ran to the doors. He caught the beginning of her mother saying "You know if you wanted you could just make some kids with him! You do know how to do that don't you?" Elizabeth said.

"MOM! I know ok! I went through sex ed a long time ago! Sheesh! That is so way out there!" Elena yelled and giggled at the same time as she felt incredibly embarrassed.

"I'm just saying you're now single! You can live a bit now! Have a few flings!" her mother replied as Seth closed the door and got to his motorcycle. Was he a potential fling? He didn't want to think



about it. He was not a fling. It was all or nothing.

**\*\*[One hour later]\*\***

Seth came back with their bags and had given the key back to the concierge after the night. He walked up the stairs as the front door was unlocked for him as Elena and her mother talked at the kitchen table.

"I heard you! I'm not that old to not know how my house sounds!" Elizabeth said through the door.

"Shitâ€|" he whispered and tried to sneak up the stairs some more. He hit a creaking stair and stopped.

"You have her bags? Answer me next time I'm talking to you young man! You are not as stealthy as Elena!" she said again.

"Yes ma'am!" he responded. "You'd be surprised when I want to beâ€|" he mumbled to himself.

"Thank you!" she said. He headed up quickly and looked around. He peeked through Elena's door and saw her room was just as he had seen it in the crystal, but with a bed and no sim pod. He had been there a few times, but always never alone, and she was usually with Andy. It seemed different somehow now that they were grown up. Things change for better or for worse he figured once he was no longer a young boy in school. He saw the small pelican sitting on her dresser and saw the wing broken off. He cocked his head as he looked at it. He knew it was given to her by her father a long time ago. Surprising she didn't throw it away or try and fix it, or maybe it had sentimental value.

He walked away from the door and opened the next one beyond the bathroom and saw it was a sparsely filled room with a bed. He quickly knew it was Milo's old room, and could smell air freshener used inside. He must have smoked in the past, whether cigarettes or cigars or other, he didn't know. He set his things down as he had put Elena's bags near her door, and then turned around and opened the window. He needed some clean air. The window itself slid up before the top suddenly slammed right down, nearly clipping his fingers.

"Seth? Are you ok?" Elena asked from down below.

"Fine! Just the window sort ofâ€|" attacked me!" He yelled down.

"Oh! I forgot to tell you I am so sorry! Milo's window does that!" Elizabeth yelled up.

"Found out, thank you for the heads up on monsieur guillotine" he replied. Both women laughed.

"Monsieur guillotine?" Elena asked chuckling.

"Yes, that's his new nickname. He says hello by trying to chop off an extremity" he yelled down.

"I hope he doesn't chop off a requirement" Elizabeth yelled up and looked at Elena and winked. She gasped.

"Momâ€¦" she blushed and looked away.

"What? I can joke too" she responded.

"It isn't like that, so stop thinking that way. You're as bad as Amber" Elena scolded her.

"Well maybe we're seeing something you can do to get over Andy. Move on to someone else. Elena, he's a nice guy, and you know him" Elizabeth told her daughter and held her hands gently.

"Not as much as you think I doâ€¦" she replied softly.

"What does that mean? What, he doesn't have those feelings for you? I know he definitely had a crush on you when you two were younger, it wasn't that hard to figure out from anybody's standpoint" asked her.

"No, it's not that, I don't know what he feels, and I haven't asked him. Things areâ€¦ complicated with us right now. I can't explain it, but he's not exactly like how we remembered him in the past, and, I've changed too." Elizabeth squeezed her daughter's hands gently.

"He doesn't look like he's changed towards you, that's obvious. I highly doubt he's given up on you or he wouldn't be here. He saved you didn't you tell me that? And he's here now watching out for you. Open up to him Elena. Andy and Jessica make a good couple, you and heâ€¦ might too. As long as you're happy. If he makes you happy, then everything can pick up quickly, and you don't have to feel sad that Andy isn't in your life anymore. Someone else could be there, someone right here" Elizabeth told her smiling.

"You guys are just too much you know that? I'll see ok? Don't rush things, he didn't do that in the past soâ€¦" Elena tried to say.

"All the more reason to show you're interested" her mother told her.

"I don't know if I'm interested! I'mâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I don't know what I am!" she replied.

"You are, a mother can sense these things. You two just hang out, you can still do that when you're an adult right? You'd be surprised how quickly you might hit it off" her mother told her.

"Let's change the subject please. I'll think about it" Elena replied and looked up towards the stairs through the doorway. She already was thinking about it.

Seth took his clothes and tried to put them in the closet, but was barraged by a slew of items falling towards him.

"Ok, that was I'm guessing the quick way to hide stuffâ€¦" he whispered to himself. He looked up and saw a bar inside the closet that was most likely used for pull ups. He noticed a break in one spot and knew immediately what that meant. He grabbed the bar and unscrewed a few bolts and it suddenly came off, and hidden inside

were a few bags of marijuana and some other drugs he knew easily.

"Milo, youâ€¦ wow, I didn't know high schoolers could get a hold of that stuffâ€¦ wait what the fuck am I sayingâ€¦ I should flush this down the toiletâ€¦ except this, wonder if he knew it can be used as an anestheticâ€¦ and this one as an explosiveâ€¦" he said to himself as he picked at one bag and then looked behind him. He heard steps going up the staircase and he quickly screwed the bar back to its original place.

"Are you ok in there Seth?" Elena asked.

"Fine, just got attacked by a few more things in here. Thank you for letting me stay here Elizabeth, it's just what I wanted, my very own death trap" he said as he stepped out of the closet and nearly slipped on a porn magazine.

"Jesus!" he yelped as he regained his footing and looked down.

"Oh Miloâ€¦" Elena growled.

"Boys will be boys, they think that way about girls" Elizabeth sighed out. Seth looked between them and put the magazine in the trash.

"Yeah, well, it's both sexes actually" he commented.

"No it isn't!" Elizabeth scoffed.

"Yes it is, both sides are equally that way, I would know" he replied.

"And how would you know that young man?" Elizabeth smirked and glanced at Elena. This suddenly looked like the worst questioning to start. It almost sounded like Seth had experience and Elena was still, well, a virgin.

"I have had to do some observations towards some women with how they think, it's called a psych evaluation, to see how well others handle things or what they do normally" he responded. Elena sighed in relief. She didn't know why she did it, but she felt like she was glad he wasn't getting jumped by every girl out there.

"Oh? What do you do exactly? For work I mean? Did you become a psychologist?" Elizabeth asked and nudged Elena. A Psychologist made tons of money, and would have more than likely taken care of Elena for the rest of her life if she decided to retire from the UNSC early.

"Me? No, I work in communications" he told her. He was lying but Elena didn't know that, but communications wasn't actually lying per se. He did communicate with her to save her.

"What type of communications?" Elizabeth probed.

"Telecommunications. Transfer of large amounts of information, getting things to different places, people, that sort of stuff" he told her. He had it planned out.

"Which company?" Elizabeth asked.

"NorthWeb Incorporated" he replied.

"Oh them! The company I've worked for talks with them all the time, they're very good at what they do" Elizabeth beamed.

"Yes, they have a good reputation, and I'm proud to work for them" he smiled. Elena couldn't tell if he was lying or if he was telling the truth just now. He was very good at it.

"Well, I'll let you two get settled in. We can have lunch soon. Are you two hungry?" Elizabeth asked. They both nodded. Elena's mother nodded and patted Elena on her shoulder.

"Rememberâ€¦" she whispered as she left the room.

"Motherâ€¦ stopâ€¦" she said through gritted teeth as Seth checked the closet again. A bowling ball fell from the top shelf and nearly brained him as it flew by and landed at his feet.

"Oh shitâ€¦ close callâ€¦" he sighed out as Elena ran to see if he was ok.

"I didn't know Milo bowledâ€¦" Elena said confused as she looked at the blue fiery ball.

"Now we know, and knowing is half the battle, or in this case, the ambush" he said with some cocked eyebrows. The thing was a fifteen pounder. The iridescent blue urethane ball looked slightly scratched at some areas, but overall looked interesting.

"Hey I haven't bowled in a while" Elena suddenly.

"You want to go?" Seth asked.

"Well, if you want to" she replied.

"I'm pretty much following you around Elena, as long as nothing is harmful we're fine" he told her.

"So if I asked to do anything, you'd just go along with it?" she asked coyly, and then immediately realized how she had presented the question and looked away from him, flexing her lips and closing her mouth in embarrassment. She might have suggested something that was less than wholesome in her tone.

"Um, well your mother would probably be a part of the situation now, and your other friends, so some things would be a bit difficult to perform" he told her with a small grin on his face and a furrowed brow. He probably got the idea but was trying to be nice, and it made her even more embarrassed as she blushed profusely.

"I'll um, I'll let you get unpacked while I think about what we can do, and lunch is gonna be ready. Bowling sounds nice though, butâ€¦ well, yeah, I'll let you get unpacked" she said and quickly left, feeling very awkward. Amber's and her mother's words were working on her and she didn't realize it.

"Hey, are you feeling better today?" Seth asked as she reached the door.

"Yeah, thanks for asking" she said without turning to look at him.

"Glad to hear it" he said as he reached into his bag and pulled out his toiletries purse. He activated his trigger lock on his pistol and slid it into a small slot in his bag, hidden from view. He was in someone else's home, and he didn't need to carry it.

Elena walked into her own room and picked up her bag along the way, and dropped it at the foot of her bed. She started to unpack and put clothes away, and then looked over at the window sill to see two pictures placed there. One was her at the age of thirteen with everyone, while the other was her a year ago with Andy and the others. She picked it up and looked at it.

She looked so happy in the picture, with her ex-fiancÃ©. She rubbed her thumb gently against the glass of the frame as she thought back to that time. It was gone now, all of that happiness she knew. Things had changed since then, and she needed to catch up or she'd be stuck as a relic. She put it down and looked up at the pelican on the dresser. She got up and walked over to it and picked it up, still having the wing broken off. She had tried so many different glues on it, and nothing worked. She rubbed her fingers over it gently. It must have been returned from her old quarters on board the Conundrum when they thought she was dead.

"Sandwiches are ready" Elizabeth said from down below.

"I'll be there in a minute" Elena yelled down as Seth walked out of his room and saw her standing there looking at the thing.

"You know, I have some bonding material that could work on that" he said softly.

"I've tried almost everything. I think it just doesn't want to be fixed. Who knows? I've never flown a pelican without one of the wings on it, it might be able to do its job still" she chuckled and moved it through the air, minus the wing.

"You never know. I read a long time ago Elena, that there was one pilot in the past who had his air boss call a manufacturer and ask if they could land an F-15 with only one wing. The company had told them absolutely not. Well guess what? He did it" he told her smiling.

"You think I could do that?" she asked with a smirk.

"Knowing you? Pfft, you're better than that pilot by a long shot girl. Definitely" he chuckled. She looked back down at the pelican and moved it in swooping gestures, the little girl in her slowly coming to the foreground as Seth watched.

"What do you two want to drink?" Elizabeth called from the kitchen.

"I'll just have some milk" Elena yelled down.

"Dido ma'am, thank you" Seth yelled after. Elena giggled and put the pelican down on her dresser next to the wing and walked down the hallway and down the stairs with Seth in tow.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena and her mother talked while Seth just listened as they finished their food and had a few cookies after.

"So I was thinking, maybe we could go bowling tomorrow?" Elena said.

"Oh I haven't bowled in a long time, it would be fun" Elizabeth replied.

"Seth, have you bowled before?" Elena asked.

"A few times" he said smiling and blinking. A few times was being modest. He could get a score of 300 easily if he tried, it wasn't very hard with his control over his muscles. He could also golf well too, just never took interest in other sports.

"Then we should go. Let's call Amber and the others and we can all go tomorrow" Elena told them.

"Wonderful" Elizabeth replied and Seth just sat there. Elena called her friends and Elizabeth cleaned the plates, and then they each sort of went to do their own thing. Elizabeth went to make some calls for her work, and Elena went into her room while Seth just went outside. He noticed there was a lot of yard work that needed to be done, as weeds were everywhere. Elizabeth probably didn't have the energy these days to attempt it, and there didn't look to be a gardener paid to do it.

He decided to clean a few things up and spread some weed killer, and filled up the organics bin the house had. Once he was finished, he realized it was getting dark and headed inside. He walked upstairs to take a shower and noticed Elena's door was cracked open with her lights on. He walked up to it and noticed she was at her desk, but she was laying against her old terminal.

Seth walked inside quietly and noticed she was asleep, with her pelican model sitting next to her and a pack of glue. She was still trying. He smiled and went back to his room to grab a special tube full of metal sealant, which would literally melt into the model and harden to not only fix the wing, but seal the break compared to just bond it together. He normally used it to repair things during operations in some form. It was extremely caustic to skin, so he wore gloves and smeared a tiny bit on the wing and pushed it together. The wing seemed to get soft as he pushed, and it slowly formed together. He let go and placed it down on the desk as Elena quietly slept. He slipped out of the room and walked to his to get some clothes and take a shower.

\*\*[0800 hours, March 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena woke up with an imprint of her hand on her face, and looked around for a second. She remembered she was waiting for the glue to set to try and fix the pelican one final time, but it had fallen

apart and she just didn't care anymore after she was nearly asleep. She looked down at it and noticed it was fixed, and there was only a slight flat texture that seemed to weave along the break area of the wing, almost as if it had melted together, almost welded. She picked it up and the wing didn't fall off. Someone must have fixed it for her.

She opened her door and walked past the bathroom to see Seth brushing his teeth without a shirt on, and some black chino pants.

"Did you do this?" she asked with her mouth slightly opened and smiling.

"Did it work? I only use that stuff for wires usually or metal" he told her in between brushes and spit out the foam in his mouth.

"Yes it worked. Thank you" she said softly and smiled. He rinsed his mouth and wiped at his lips with a small towel.

"Welcome" he said and walked by her and to his room.

"It was really thoughtful, I've been trying to fix it for almost thirteen years" she continued. He reached down and grabbed the tube and flipped it through the air, and Elena caught it.

"Keep it, I can get a hold of more of it easily. Just don't tell many other people about it ok? Military grade stuff, so it's not usually for home use. I found that out the hard way when I used it on a toaster one time" he told her. She chuckled as he put his shirt on.

"You fixed a toaster with this?" she asked.

"I said used it on a toaster one time, I didn't say fixed" he told her.

"Ah, is this one of those I can't tell you things?" she asked quietly.

"What? No, I found out the springs inside a toaster at my high rise had broken and I really didn't want to go out in the rain to go find another one cause it was raining cats and dogs outside at the time, by the way I do have a car, and so I had some larger high tensile springs for a weight machine, the ones that hold the thing together, not to weight lift" he told her with a small smile showing on his face.

"Oh dear god!" she started laughing.

"Yeah, so I melted them in, thinking they would work. I was younger than I am now when I did this Elena, and stupid. So, I did it, and it worked well, so I put some toast in it. When it fired the toast, it implanted them into the bottom of one of my cupboards" he told her chuckling. She laughed so hard she could barely breathe.

"You overcooked the toast too?" she asked in between laughing.

"I modified the heating wires too to quicken it up. I learned later that the thing could literally act like a flame thrower with the right ingredients, specifically pine nut bread" he told her with a

goofy smile on his face and his eyes wide open along with his eyebrows cocked. She laughed again.

"I don't think I intend to do that again. Next time I'll just use the warranty or buy a new one" he told her chuckling at her laughing so hard.

"Wow, that would have been funny to see" she chuckled as she slowly came down from her laughing fit. She fought to get her breath back. Elizabeth walked to the door downstairs and opened it as the doorbell rang. Both of them heard laughing and giggling downstairs as the others came to the house. Seth and Elena got ready for the day quickly and walked downstairs.

"Hey you! You're alive!" Marcus said and hugged her.

"Yeah, been getting that a lot these days. You know me, you can't kill a ghost" she told him.

"Definitely" he replied and pulled away. Jennifer hugged her next, and then Maria and Amber, and finally her husband Greg.

"Hey, sorry about how you found out about Andy. You'll move forward like you always do" Maria told her.

"Yeah, thanks" she replied and gave a fake smile. It still hurt every time someone told her she wasn't with him anymore.

"Hey Seth!" Marcus suddenly said as Seth walked up and shook hands with him.

"Hey" he replied with a smile.

"I didn't know you were here" he told him.

"Yeah, you should know Seth saved Elena!" Amber told them.

"Really? So are you military too?" Marcus asked.

"Not exactly" he responded.

"Oh? What do you do?" Marcus asked.

"Telecommunications" he replied.

"Wait, how does that-" Marcus tried to say as Jennifer walked up.

"Oh honey, don't grill him on the details, it's all probably hush hush on how he saved her. It's good to see you again Seth" she said and hugged him.

"Likewise" he replied and pulled away.

"Well, everyone ready for breakfast?" Elizabeth asked. They all nodded and sat down with their kids as they pulled out coloring books to keep them occupied while they made small chit chat. Marcus and Elena talked while the kids played around, and even got a chance to sit in Elena's lap. Marcus's daughter was six. They pretty much had her right after high school.



"I'm going to fly when I'm older" she giggled as Marcus and Jennifer looked up at Elena.

"Well how about that? I'm sure you'll be a fantastic pilot" she told the girl.

"No, I'm gonna fly without a plane, like supergirl" she told her. Everybody chuckled.

"I don't think you can-" Jennifer tried to say.

"Jetpacks Jennifer. Jetpacks" Seth told him with a laugh.

"Oh yeah, those things Marcus makes" she chuckled. Elena gave them a goofy smile and then helped the girl draw in her coloring book. She looked like she was a natural taking care of the girl.

"Sheesh, we should let you watch our kids more often after this Elena, you really know your stuff" everyone told her as Amber's son was playing a game on his handheld and couldn't get by a certain spot, so Elena helped him.

"She needs to get me some grandkids eventually" Elizabeth said as she grabbed another cup from the cupboard.

"Mother" she teasingly glared at her.

"When she has time obviously, and when she meets that man of her dreams of course" Elizabeth chuckled. Amber nudged Elena and she rolled her eyes and looked at Seth. He was checking some equations Marcus was writing on a napkin.

"Swap that for that" Seth said.

"But the cohesion of it will warp" Marcus said.

"Not if you do this" he said and wrote another equation just under it.

"Boys, always have to fix things" Amber grumbled.

"Excuse me, do you know Phasic Quantum Physics? No? This is geek talk here, non-doctorates stay out unless you can talk the talk" Seth eyed her with a smirk on his face. Amber cocked her neck back a bit and furrowed her eyebrows. She just got mouthed at by him.

"I didn't know you had a doctorate in Phasic Quantum Physics" Elena said.

"Eh, I try not to let on how much I know, makes people look at me funny" he told her as she stared at him. He was very educated.

"Like we are now?" Amber scoffed. Seth looked at her and then looked at the floor. It wasn't a glare, it was almost like he felt like he didn't belong. Elena caught it and felt sorry for him.

"Now now, both of you" Marcus said trying to defuse the situation. Amber always said things that weren't always the best thing to say at certain situations.

"So, is everyone ready for a game of bowling?" Elizabeth asked. Everyone agreed. They finished their breakfast and picked up a few bags, mostly kid's spare underwear and assorted toys and headed out. Everyone piled into two vans as the kids wanted Elena to sit with them in the back, and Seth would ride with her mother. Just then he got a call on his cell. He checked his phone and saw a text message.

"Need to send you something. Important data. Slip away soon" he read. He sighed and typed into it.

"Going bowling. Sending directions. This better be good" he replied to the text. It was a GRID operative under Metfield's command, ground ops, temp medical.

"It is. It's about Elena. She might be a doll and not even know it."

Seth's face suddenly went blank. A doll was code for Manchurian candidate. She could be a sleeper agent for the Precursors and not even know it and he didn't know the trigger or the effect. She could be a walking time bomb.

## 9. Love Gained

"Is anything wrong?" Elena asked.

"No, nothing is wrong, just a bit of information, nothing new" he said. He gave her a shrug and she nodded. He was lying.

They got into their respective cars and headed to the bowling alley and then parked. Elena was being led by the hand by the kids as everyone else walked into the building. They each were issued shoes and a bowling ball and sat down at lane seven. As each of the members of the party typed their names into the score machine, Seth noticed a person near the restrooms.

"Hey, I'll be back in a minute, just gotta use the head" he told them. Elena nodded as they continued making the list, and finally the game started. Amber was up first, followed by Elena, and then Elizabeth, and then it was Greg and then Jennifer and Amber's son Joseph, then Marcus and Maria, and finally Sally and last was Seth.

Amber bowled quickly and got six, but her spare only gave her two more. Elena walked up and nearly got a strike on the first run, but her spare hit the last pin.

"Sheesh! I guess you haven't lost your touch fly girl!" Amber cheered. Elena laughed as she sat down. Her mother got a strike.

"Wow, your mother is pretty good" Jennifer gawked.

"All in the wrist" Elizabeth chuckled. Greg was able to make a spare after hitting only four pins. Jennifer walked up and got a gutter, and she walked back laughing.

"I'm not used to these shoes!" she told them.

"Pfft, you just suck" Amber joked and smiled. Jennifer scoffed and rolled her eyes smiling. Greg helped Joseph get his ball and then rolled it down the lane. The ball hit six pins slowly.

"Good job bucko!" Amber cheered as her son ran up to her and hugged her. Elena looked over at the restrooms and saw Seth standing there talking to someone that was somewhat obscured behind a telephone booth.

"Whose Seth talking to?" Amber asked. Elena narrowed her eyes and swapped her lenses. Almost as soon as she did that, she received a jamming signal coming from that person. LED transmitters were disrupting infrared and night vision, and x-ray was blocked by interference. Whoever it was, they were Black Ops like Seth was. She turned off her lenses and saw Seth sigh and look in her direction. She quickly looked back to Amber as they both saw Marcus bowl and get two pins. Something seemed to worry him, and it might have something to do with her.

"She isn't acting like one, and I doubt they know any leaders" Seth told the man.

"It may not be an assassination maneuver, it could be a turn off switch" the man told him.

"To kill her? Doubtful. They wouldn't do that to someone whose superior in flying. Noâ€ it could be waiting for her to get on board a shipâ€" Seth thought out loud.

"Possible. We'll keep an eye out. There are others researching this. We took some blood samples and brain scans of her before she left. If there is one, we'll find it" the man said.

"So she might not have one? Pfft, you just scared me for nothing then" he told him.

"Better safe than sorry, remember?" the man said to Seth. He nodded. He knew the rule.

"I am not good at this" Marcus chuckled.

"It was just bad luck honey, you'll get it next time" Jennifer replied. He sat down as Maria got up to bowl. She knocked down four pins along the right side and nearly had a fifth drop in the middle. Sally was next up as Seth started coming back over. She got a gutter ball as Seth reached them.

"Hey, your turn is up" Elena told him.

"Ah, just in time, there was a line in the restroom apparently" he told her.

"Oh, that's ok" she replied. She knew he was lying, but he sounded so normal. He must be used to it in his line of work, but he didn't need to lie to her. It almost irked her nerves that he lied. He could have just told her that he had something important to do.

He picked up his ball and got into a stance, and then slid his ball

down the lane quickly. Strike.

"Nice!" Jennifer cheered as Elena clapped.

"Now you're just showing off to the ladies" Amber smirked.

"Me? Show off? Only when I'm trying to impress and it's all good in fun" he said smiling and winked at Elena. He sat down as she blushed.

The rest of the game was easy enough as Elizabeth got a strike every time, and Elena got one finally and one gutter ball. Jennifer was pretty average after her first and Seth was getting a strike every time as well.

"Wow, you two should have a competition" Amber said astonished.

"I'd let her win sadly" Seth chuckled.

"Don't you even think about it little man. You fight to the end" Elizabeth growled. Everyone chuckled as he put his hands up in surrender. He somehow heard the subtle meaning behind that as well. He gave up once before for something that wasn't for fun. It was for a heart.

"I think I'd like to have a competition with this one" some man stumbled over and leaned over the booth with his hand on Elena's shoulder. Elena quickly pulled away as they all looked at him.

"Sorry, family game only sir" Elizabeth said sternly.

"Oh, I didn't mean a game hehe. A completely different competition. Whaddaya say girlie? Ride my alley?" he giggled. Elena was offended and Seth walked up to him.

"I think you've had enough to drink sir, and you shouldn't say things like that around children" he told him. Seth's voice was very deep for someone who wasn't bulky, and he could be very intimidating with it when he wanted to be.

"Oh ho, my mistake then, we could always talk about it away from the kiddies eh girlie? Behind the building? Just you and me and a little romantic getaway" he giggled. Two employees walked up to him.

"Sir, we think you should leave, you've had enough from the bar. Time to go" they told him.

"Hehe, I can wait for an answer, I can already tell what it is from a girl like you" he giggled and wobbled off towards the door. Seth glared after him while Elena literally shrunk. A girl like her? She had never slept with anyone, not even Andy. She was waiting for after marriage. She started thinking, not about the drunken man that had just walked away, but about what she'd be doing in the future.

"Hey, are you ok?" Amber asked her.

"Yeah, don't worry, just a little shaken about that" she told them.

"We all would have him out of here, just so you know" Jennifer growled as she watched him leave and head left outside the doors.

"I can handle him guys, I'm trained remember" she told them smiling.

"Well, we'd still back you up" Amber told her and hugged her friend.

"Yeah, thanks" she replied and looked up at Seth. Seth had gotten right in his face. He looked like he would have destroyed him right there and then if he touched her again. He turned and caught her gaze and nodded. She gave him a little smile and nodded back. Elena was well trained, but Sethâ€¦ for all she knew, he would have turned him into a pretzel. He wasn't a Spartan, but he didn't have to be with the training he had.

"Are you sure you're ok? Do you need a drink or something?" Amber asked.

"No, no drink, I know what happens now when I have too many" Elena told her.

"We're not suggesting you have ten fly girl, just one to calm your nerves" Amber giggled. Elena looked at Seth as he sat down. He shrugged. It was her body. She could do what she wanted. Hell, if she wanted to, she could have accepted that guy's proposal and left the group and went in back, to be groped and screwed by some drunken fat guy. It was doubtful she would ever do that, but she had the freedom to. It would simply be incredibly odd, and against who she was. There was no way she'd go near that guy willingly.

"Um, ehâ€¦ I don't know" she replied.

"Up to you. One margarita won't have that much effect" Amber told her quietly while the others continued bowling.

"Well, ok, one" she told her.

"No problem. We wouldn't let you get drunk here anyways. There are kids here remember?" Amber giggled to her and she giggled back.

Elena walked over with Amber to get a margarita and waited for the bartender to make it. There was one sitting on the counter for a woman with a man talking to her just as the margarita was finished. There was a slight commotion of something said by the man and they looked over. The guy had made the girl angry in some form and she walked off. He threw his hands up in confusion and walked after her trying to calm her down in some form, but she didn't want anything to do with him.

"Hmmm, lover's tiff?" Amber asked.

"Maybe, who knows" Elena responded. She picked up one of the margaritas thinking it was hers, and walked back to the rest of the team with Amber. The rest of the game went without a hitch as Seth scored 300 for the last two games. The third and final game he was pitted against Elizabeth in a competition. Seth just laughed as she smirked.

"You aren't losing on purpose mister, if you miss the last strike, I'm gonna think you threw the match and I'll make you clean my whole house as punishment. This is the final game so you have to give it your all, cause we leave after this" she told him. Everybody oohed at them. He chuckled and nodded. They continued their game as Elena drank her margarita. After she finished slowly, she noticed her eye sight was a little off beyond the buzz she'd expect and the nerve calming. She was warmer and felt a little dizzy. She took a deep breath as Elizabeth bowled her final strike.

"Beat that" she told Seth and he put his hands up in surrender.

"I'll try" he told her.

"Hey, I have to go to the restroom, I'll catch you guys outside once the game is over?" Elena told them. They nodded and she got up and went to the facilities. She shook her head a bit as she tried to clear it. Her hearing was a little off as well, fuzzy. What was happening?

Her movement was a little off and she sat down in a stall and closed the door. Things looked different, sounds were not what she expected them, and she felt aroused and wrong at the same time. What was in that drink? An aphrodisiac? A date rape drug? She sat there for a minute and hoped it would wear off, but it didn't. Her body was sensitive and her skin was hot. She decided to walk out and see if the others knew what was going on, but they were already outside waiting for her in the parking lot, just right of the building.

She slowly walked towards the door, keeping her balance as she did so just barely, and just as she left the building, the drunken man was waiting for her with another bottle held in hand.

"Hey there girlie, thought over my offer to get nasty?" he said giggling and eyed her up and down. She was out of sight of the cars as she tried to stay standing, and no one could really see her as she nearly flopped into his arms.

"I'll take that as a yes" he giggled in surprise and carried her off behind the building. Just as they reached the back, hidden behind the dumpster, he leaned her against the wall and pushed his hands under her shirt and pulled down her bra. She couldn't really think well at all. Was she drugged? Did she grab the wrong margarita? Maybe the woman had stormed off because she found out about the man doing that.

She tried to bring her hands up to stop him from fondling her breasts, but he simply thought she was asking him to move around more. He started to kiss her with his foul mouth and yellow teeth, as she tried to turn away and he held her chin towards him.

"Please please" she tried to say, trying to get him to stop.

"Sure sure girlie, I know what you want" he giggled and tried to unbutton her jeans and push his hand down them between her legs.

Seth leaned against Elizabeth's car waiting for Elena to come out.

"She's been in there for a while, is she ok?" Amber asked.

"I'm gonna go check on her" Seth replied and they nodded. He walked to the bowling alley and walked in, then went to the women's restroom.

"Do you need something sir?" a waiter asked.

"Yes, did you see a black haired woman walk in here? Long hair, slightly tan looking skin, blue eyes, wearing a red glossy jacket and jeans?" Seth asked.

"I saw her go out the door sir" he replied.

"Thank you" he said as he jogged to the door. He looked right and realized she couldn't have gone that way or he'd have seen her. He decided to go left. Maybe she had forgotten they parked on the other side? He walked towards the side of the building and looked around. He heard some movement behind the dumpster and just as he reached it, he saw the drunkard, but he wasn't alone. Elena. She was lying there almost helpless, and he had her almost stripped. Her pants were lying nearby and her panties were lying on top of it. His pants were down and he was literally about to lay on top of her. She was trying to push him away, trying to roll sideways, but she couldn't move very well. He immediately realized she was drugged. He couldn't have done it himself because she would have knocked him on his ass before he could attempt it. The margarita.

Elena tried to close her legs as he giggled.

"Oh, feisty, you'll love it soon enough slut" he giggled as suddenly someone grabbed him from behind and slammed him into a tree. He tried to throw a punch with his pants down but got a strike to his neck and a gut punch, followed by being flipped into the dumpster. He was out like a light. Seth knelt next to Elena as she tried to push him away, her face half matted by her sweat stricken hair.

"Noâ€¦ pleaseâ€¦ I don'tâ€¦" she was mumbling. She could barely speak.

"Hey, don't worry, shhh, I'm here" he whispered as he grabbed her underwear and slid them onto her legs and up.

"Seth?... oh godâ€¦" she almost cried as she reached out fumbling with her arms and hugged him.

"Thank god it's youâ€¦ you, I'm so glad it's you hereâ€¦" she mumbled as she leaned her head against his shoulder and faced his neck.

"Everything is gonna be ok, he can't hurt you. We need to get you to a hospital" he told her.

"I don'tâ€¦ I don't want to be in aâ€¦ I just want to go homeâ€¦ with youâ€¦" she whispered.

"Elena, you've been drugged, more than likely Rohypnol. Date rape

drug. You should be checked out" he whispered to her.

"I don'tâ€¦ I just wanna go homeâ€¦ my body canâ€¦ handle itâ€¦ it's so hotâ€¦" she said as she rolled and looked into his eyes, but she seemed off. She giggled slightly as she looked at him and suddenly kissed him. He pulled away as he just stared at her.

"Elena, weâ€¦" he tried to say.

"I don't want that guyâ€¦ I never wanted that to happenâ€¦ I want youâ€¦ just you and meâ€¦" she chuckled as she leaned in towards him and softly grabbed his hands and tried to move them towards her chest. As she leaned in to kiss him again, she passed out.

"Riko, can Elena handle the drug?" he asked through his bone mic.

"Depends, how much was used? You have a medical system built into your cell right?" she asked over the com. Seth had a medical license. He was a trained combat medic as well as a surgeon because of his job. He had to make due when he needed to with his abilities. He could cauterize wounds with high friction air near blood flow almost like a laser.

He pulled out his cell and scanned over Elena. She was lying against him with her face plastered against his shoulder and her pants weren't on yet.

"She can handle it, but it's up to you. That drug mixed with alcohol can have CNS depression activation to her nervous system. She's sleeping right now, but that could have been deadly for her. I'd have to say she got enough of a dose to make her pliable, but not unconscious directly. She's asleep from the alcohol most likely having its effect double" Riko told him.

"Alright, well, she wanted to go home, I guess I can get her there without the hospitalâ€¦ unless you suggest otherwise" he asked.

"Her body can resist the effects, though not nearly as well as yours can. From the scan you just took, she should be fine. She may suffer from temporary amnesia about what happened later, butâ€¦ she might remember it alsoâ€¦" Riko told him softly.

"I hope she does have amnesia about it. I'd hate for her to remember this" he replied and grabbed her pants and put them on her, and then made sure her bra was in place and her shirt pulled down. He pulled her jacket closed and picked her up, and then carried her out towards the cars.

"Oh my god, what the hell happened?" Amber asked in shock.

"She's ok, she just needs some sleep" he told them. He explained to them about the drunkard away from the kids and how it was probably not him and was the man who left the building with the woman.

"Shit, we should get her to-" Amber said.

"No, she can handle it. I have a scanner in my phone that said so, and I am a registered doctor. She's fine, well, I got to her to make sure she'd be fine" he told them.



"Fine? She nearly got raped by some fat ugly drunk guy Seth! She is not fine!" Amber growled.

"She didn't, and she probably won't remember it either. Let's get her home. The drug will wear off and I have something that might help" he told them. He always carried cancellation drugs in his bag just in case, in both pill and injectable form. Nullifiers. He could also use caffeine pills to clean things out.

"What about the cops? Hello, we need to call them about this" Amber told him.

"And say what? That she was caught in the back drugged by a guy who isn't here anymore because she grabbed the wrong margarita and now was about to take up the offer of some drunk? Look, I get we tell them, but at the house ok? We'll explain things to them there, carefully" he told her.

"Fine, not like I want to hang around here anymoreâ€¦ you have something though? Like what? How the hell do you have something that might help? You go on too many binges?" Amber asked. Seth glared at her.

"This is not the time to be snapping at me Amber, she needs to get home" he growled. She sighed and nodded as they all piled into the cars and drove back to the house.

\*\*[8 hours later]\*\*

Elena awoke with a start and looked around her room. Seth was lying against the bed asleep and halfway on the ground. Her head was hazy and she couldn't remember some things that happened before. When did she fall asleep? Weren't they at the bowling alley?

She looked at Seth as he slept. His head was leaning against the side of the bed and the dresser with his arms crossed over his chest. Flashes of what had happened came through her head as she suddenly remembered. The drunkard taking her clothes off, the feel of him sticking his tongue in her mouth, his breath, how he groped her and shoved his hands down her pants and touched herâ€¦ she was revolted, and she almost cried. She had nearly had the same thing happen to her as when Pelkin tried so long ago. She was nearly raped again, but she had no control of it this time. If Seth hadn't been thereâ€¦

Seth. He had gotten there right when the man was about to lay on top of her. He had saved her yet again. She touched his shoulder very gently as she remembered what she had said to him vaguely. Did she really ask him to have sex with her? She looked down at herself under the covers and saw her clothes were still on. He had pretty much seen her naked back then, so she shouldn't really care if he had stripped her for something else. He was still clothed obviously, so he didn't do anything to her. He wouldn't unless she really asked him.

She leaned over his shoulder and watched him sleep. He must have been worried about her to sit by her bed. Elena leaned in closer, almost lip to lip. She finally kissed him, not really knowing why she did it. He woke up and bonked his head against the dresser and looked at her.

"Ouch" he winced as she winced as well looking at him.

"Sorry! I'm really sorry! I justâ€¦| sorry" she said as she reached her hands out and touched his head as he kept one eye closed and looked at her.

"You're awake, good, guess the Nullifier worked" he told her.

"I got drugged? The drinkâ€¦|" she thought as she looked up at the ceiling at her models.

"Yeah, that. Hey, how are you feeling?" he asked.

"Iâ€¦|" she stopped and looked at the floor, feeling really disgusting. That man had touched her all over. She felt so filthy.

"I need a showerâ€¦|" she told him. He nodded as she slipped out of her bed and stumbled, her sense of balance completely off. He caught her and held her up, then helped her to the bathroom as Amber and Elizabeth sat on the couch downstairs.

"Hey, she's awake?" Amber asked.

"Yeah, she just needs to get cleaned up a bit, and a bit of help. She'll probably purge" he told them as he helped her to the shower. She felt so weak as he sat her down on the toilet and pulled the trashcan to her.

Elizabeth and Amber went upstairs immediately as Elena nearly doubled over and vomited in the trashcan. She was nauseous after what had happened to her and Amber and Elizabeth had Seth leave. He stepped out of the bathroom as Elizabeth pulled down her underwear just as Amber closed the door most of the way.

"Grab her some clothes please Seth" Amber told him. He nodded and went into her room and grabbed another pair of underwear and shirt and bra, then pants and socks. He heard the shower running as Elena cried inside.

"It's gonna be ok honey, nothing happened, Seth got to you, it's ok" he heard Elizabeth tell her. They were helping her into the shower. He stood outside and leaned against the wall waiting. The shower turned off and another ten minutes flew by, but he waited patiently. He heard a blow dryer turn on as Amber slipped through the door and went downstairs and grabbed a roll of paper towels and some cleaner, and went back inside, more than likely to clean up any other vomit. Elena held herself up much better now that she had done that from what he saw through the crack.

"He didn't do anything sweetheart, you're gonna be fine" Elizabeth told her softly. She nodded with her eyes half open, looking depressed. Seth wanted to go back to the bowling alley and find that son of a bitch and kill him. He didn't want her to feel like this. The door opened as Elena walked out staring at the ground.

"Hey" Seth said softly as she looked up at him. He remembered seeing Sarah a few times in her squadron, all timid and meek most of the time. Elena looked that way now. She suddenly lunged and hugged him, and he hugged back.

"Thank you" she said as her eyes were closed tight. He just held her as he looked at Amber and Elizabeth and rubbed her back gently.

"I should have been there, I should have walked with you, I am so sorry" he whispered to her. He failed her. He should have been escorting her the whole way, but he didn't see any signs that anything was happening. He should have been more alert.

"Let's get you something to eat ok?" Amber said as she patted her on the shoulder gently. Elena nodded and looked up at Seth another time, guilt written into her eyes. Did she feel sorry that she couldn't protect herself? She wasn't weak by any standards, she was trained in close quarters battle just like any other soldier, and could have easily killed the drunkard if she wasn't drugged before. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. If there weren't any drugs in her system, more than likely she would have flipped the guy just like he did and sent him into one of the potted plants. She really didn't need anyone to protect her physically.

"Didâ€¦ did the kids see me like this?" Elena asked.

"No, Greg and Marcus took them home, they'll call later honey, don't worry. We already told the police" Elizabeth told her.

"I don't remember muchâ€¦ it's sort of a blurâ€¦" Elena told them.

"Don't try Elena, it's actually better if you forget it ever happened" Seth told her as he sat down at the table. She kept glancing at him. She remembered what she had said to him. Elizabeth opened the refrigerator and made a quick sandwich for Elena, who wolfed it down and drank down a glass of milk. Seth just watched her as Amber called Greg.

"I'm sorry Sethâ€¦ I can't believe I'm soâ€¦ defenselessâ€¦" Elena whispered as she kept averting her eyes away from him. Even though she had just had a shower, she felt dirty, not worth being seen. She hadn't done anything with that man, but she still felt like some slut, not worth much, even though it wasn't her fault.

"Bullshit. You aren't, you just got caught off guard. This means nothing Elena, don't worry. You still kick ass ok? Hey, look at me" Seth moved her chin and she looked up at her.

"Nothing happened. I saw alright? Nothing happened. You were drugged, he was there, he tried to take advantage, he didn't. You're going to be fine. Think that. You're going to be fine. Just take a deep breath" he told her. She took a deep breath and gazed at him. He smiled.

"You are far stronger than you think alright? Remember all the things you did in the past? Everything. This is nothing. Not even worth mentioning. Forget it ever happened" he told her. He was right, she was very strong. She was a Brigadier General in the Air Force, she had her own wing under her command, she had taken out almost ten alien fighters by herself as well as a destroyer and a Covenant Battle cruiser. She had her own pelican in a hangar, and a royalties payment from her combined effort with Marcus to make the HAMMER drone.

She smiled at Seth. "Thank you, for everything" she told him, and a wash of pain left her face as she looked relieved somehow. He simply nodded.

"I didn't do much Elena, it's all you" he replied.

"No, that's wrong, but I'm not going to argue" she said and looked away from him and stared at the table and sighed. She stood up as Amber got up to help her stand, but she waved her off and walked slowly up to her room and sat on the bed alone.

"Go up there and talk to her" Elizabeth said.

"Me?" Seth asked. Amber scoffed.

"Yes you dickhead, she needs to talk to you alone" Amber told him. He sighed and got up and went upstairs to sit next to Elena after closing and locking the door. She just stared at the dresser in front of her and glanced at Seth, giving him a small smile.

"Hey, this thing right here, this isn't about the bowling alley is it?" he asked. She kept glancing at him.

"Sort ofâ€¦ wellâ€¦ what I saidâ€¦" she told him softly.

"Oh. Uh, well, forget it happened, you weren't in the right state of mind Elena, don't worry" he told her.

"No, waitâ€¦ I need to ask you something" she said and took a deep breath and looked up at him. It was difficult for her to keep eye contact with him.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly. He was listening to her, to all of her problems like he always did. For all she knew, he had a doctorate in psychology.

"Sethâ€¦ Iâ€¦" she tried to say but the words wouldn't form in her mouth. He just sat there listening like he always did. He wouldn't interrupt her at all. He liked hearing her voice.

"Iâ€¦ I think Iâ€¦ I just wanted to say that Iâ€¦ well, I haveâ€¦ during this time you've been around, I've lost someone I loved, and now I've found someone else toâ€¦" she tried to say as she looked at him. He listened intently.

"God, why can't I get this to come out?" she groaned and looked up at the ceiling.

"It's ok, don't worry, you can say it when you feel you're ready, I'll always listen" he told her. She looked back down at him and a face of sadness washed onto her. Seth looked confused. She suddenly leaned in and kissed him deeply. She slowly pulled away as they both opened their eyes.

"Whatever I did to deserve that I need to do it more oftenâ€¦" he almost whispered. She smiled. She loved him. She just didn't know how to say it.

"Wait, what am I sayingâ€¦ Elena, this isn'tâ€¦ we shouldn'tâ€¦" he

told her and gently pushed her back. She looked confused.

"What?" she asked worried. Did she do something wrong?

"We shouldn'tâ€¦ I'mâ€¦ you don't belong with me, you belong with someone betterâ€¦" he told her.

"Wait, what? No, I, you and I, I thought youâ€¦ what about back then? I don't understand Seth" she said, confused.

"That was then. Things have changed. I can't. It's complicated. I'm complicated, and I don't want to complicate you. You deserve better" he told her. It was taking all of his willpower to say it. She looked at him quizzically.

"Is itâ€¦ was it because ofâ€¦ I'm sorry, I didn't know it would happen" she started to say and he shook his head.

"No no, it isn't that, don't ever think that would change how I look at you" he told her.

"So, you do feel the same way? Then why?" she asked searching his face.

"I just said so. Look, you need someone who is going to make you happy-" he started.

"You make me happy! Seth, I just found you again! I want you! Not someone else!" she suddenly blurted out. Did she really want him? She realized she did.

"Elenaâ€¦ the way my life works isn't the same as anyone else's. I can't tell you half of what I do. I just do it. There may be a day I just don't come back, and not from lack of trying. I can't do that to you. I never want to hurt you, ever, and that will" he told her. She searched his eyes.

"Fuck that" she told him.

"What?" he asked confused.

"Fuck that, you aren't giving up. I'm offering and you turn me down? You fought and gave up the last time, don't give up this time damn it. You want to hear the words? Is that it?" she said annoyed.

"Elena, don't do this" he looked away as she grabbed his head and kissed him.

"Fine, I have feelings for you ok? I have feelings, I'm interested, and you're interested too. Don't go away, you swore you wouldn't, don't you dare break that promise" she said as she leaned her forehead against his as he tried to pull away. He looked at her as her eyes bubbled with tears.

"I'm not losing someone else, if you do, I don't know what I'll do, or can do. Don't you get it? I'm broken already, and you always found a way to keep me going in the past. I've been cracked and chipped this entire time, and you keep finding ways to fix me, every time. I get it now damn it. I get it. Andy never did that, he just showed me

to keep stumbling forward even though I was broken" she explained.

"I thought we just agreed? You are stronger than you think damn it, don't give that crap that you can't go on, look at you! You're incredible! I always thought that way!" he said raising his voice.

"Then why don't you want the chance to be with me?" she almost yelled. He was hurting her, and he was originally saying this to make sure he didn't do that. He thought for a moment as she just looked at him. She wanted an answer, and she trusted him. He had to trust her with some facts.

"Alright, alright, but you have to promise you won't tell anyone alright? Beyond classified, above top secret, you need to understand that ok? Do you trust me?" he asked. She nodded.

"Of course I do" she told him and tried to kiss him again, but he pulled away and put a finger to her lips.

"Ok. This is really difficult to say. It's normally reserved for sanctioned family membersâ€¦ and, wellâ€¦ someone extremely close" he told her. She let go of his head with one hand and held his right hand. She squeezed gently.

"I'm part of a clandestine agency connected to the UEG since over four hundred years ago. Even when the UEG was temporarily down reeled by the UNSC during the Covenant War, we were still around. It's called GRID, and we're the meaning of stealth and intelligence gathering" he told her. She looked at him oddly.

"So, you're a spy" she said matter of factly.

"Yes, but, well, I'm something more. When I was six, ONI nearly grabbed me for a project that was probably going to be the same one you are in now. The connection was that I might be able to fly a fighter with my mind" he told her. Her eyes went wide.

"What? That's impossible" she told him and he cocked his eyebrow. "It isn't impossible is it" she suddenly corrected herself as she realized he had gotten her mind out of that thing.

"Soâ€¦ why didn't I see you in my squadron? I would have been happy to see you" she gave him a small smile.

"Because I was already scouted by GRID even then. Dr. Wright was going to experiment on me so that he could develop the augmentations on you and the others. I was the guinea pig, not the pilot. And guess what? They nearly got you too" he told her. She stared at him in shock.

"No wayâ€¦ Dr. Wrightâ€¦" she trailed off.

"He didn't actually let you stay with your family, he simply lost his chance to kidnap you that time and GRID locked down on ONI. ONI isn't this bad ass secret agency in the UNSC like everyone says, we keep tabs on them all the time, and knock them around quite often. Why do you think Section 0 was formed?" he said. Section 0 was a mythical section inside ONI, the section of internal affairs. They did their

best to keep ONI honest. Elena was getting a flood of information. Did she have clearance for this? He'd probably make sure she did if she was going to finally be with him.

"So I was kidnapped, and taken to some base out in butt fuck nowhere. I woke up and escaped, but got caught. When they tried to shove a needle in my arm, Iâ€ well, I don't really know what I did, but the whole base turned into a smoking crater" he told her. She listened and tried to process the information. He was capable of that? Was he afraid he'd hurt her with that?

"GRID agents were watching the area the entire time, and picked me up and got me home, the honest way. They told lies to my parents, kept an eye on me in school, hell, one time I saw a black car in front of my house-" he told her.

"An unmarked car that followed you home like me?" she asked.

"Yup, I know about those for you Elena. That was ONI. Well, that unmarked car tore off around the corner when a chopper came out of nowhere and charged after it. I've never seen a chopper fly that low in an urban area Elena. Ever. Eventually, once high school was over and we slowly went our separate ways, I got a call asking me to meet some people" he told her.

"So that's why I never saw you after graduation" she whispered.

"Exactly. I got picked up right after for the job. Told I was being kept an eye on and for this CENTURION project they made. Don't ever tell anyone I told you that. GRID won't hurt you once I explain it to my superior, but if you tell anyone else, they'll put a bullet in your head. CENTURION is a remote viewing group, do you know what that is?" he asked.

"Vaguely, wasn't there some program in the past that had people try and remote view? It wasn't exactly effective because there wasn't enough conclusive data suggesting they knew what was going on" Elena said as she thought.

"Yeah, well, that was because they were in such a basic form with little connection to the subconscious. We go further than that. I can go further than that. That's how I found you out there. I remote viewed out of my body and tracked you down. I can also manipulate things around my mind" he told her. She looked at him with her mouth agape.

"Are you saying your telepathic or can do telekinesis?" she asked.

"No, neither, well, not the first one at least and the second only when I'm in the cryo pod. That's how this works. You see, I have three rare heart conditions" he told her and took her hand and put it over his pacemaker. She looked down at his chest and then back up at him.

"You have a pacemaker?" she asked.

"And defibrillator. I have a spare pathway on my heart, tachycardia arrhythmia condition, and Bradycardia arrhythmia. Two of those can

kill me, the third makes my life a little interesting" he explained.

"Oh myâ€¦ they can kill you?" she asked worried.

"Tachycardia is a form of your heart beating beyond what it was intended to survive, usually beyond 200 beats per minute, bpm. Usually someone would beat at around 230-240 for Tachycardia, or maybe a bit higher, but even then that is bad. When your heart drops below 30, you usually pass out or have a fainting spell, which is Bradycardia. I can reach 15 bpm at lowest before I feel the effect and my heart can flat line temporarily for around 4 minutes with no ill effect to brain oxygen levels, which is beyond not normal since every minute the brain doesn't have oxygen parts of it die and a person's chances of coming back drop by 10 percent. 10 minutes means you don't come back. Mine is apparently fourteen minutes. I can also reach in excess of 450 bpm while simply sitting around with no real problems, though I have reached 550 and higher and that's when I feel the burn so to speak" Seth explained. She moved her hand instinctively to his heart and felt it beating.

"So, what, what does this have to do with us?" she asked.

"Those are defects Elena, to anyone outside of remote viewing they are considered defects. I wasn't expected to live beyond the age of ten, but I did. At best, it's an annoyance, at worst, it can kill me. When I'm in the pod it isn't bad because of the cryo stasis effects, but outside for long periods like now, I take pills to control the signals sent to my heart. It's permanent, and they won't go away. I'm not going to worry you with my problems Elena. You need someone who won't scare the crap out of you each time I get out of the pod" he told her.

"Wait, you said it doesn't affect you much" she said, catching the loophole.

"My heart doesn't, but that's not what the problems are. When I remote view, if I do anything beyond simply looking at something and reporting back through coms, it burns some energy in me, calories, carbs, whatever, it rips out nutrients to sustain the psychic effect. Ever played those fantasy games in the past? Remember Marcus's Magic and Mastery game?" he asked.

"Yeah, mana for casting" she told him.

"This is sort of how the body would really work. This isn't magic and I'm not really throwing fireballs, it's all force and how far our concept of physics could go, though if I had the right effects happening I might be able to condense a whiff of methane through the air and light it past some fire and send it at someone" he told her. She was still worried, but suddenly giggled at the thought of someone farting and launching the fireball through the air at someone who was hostile.

"Wait, are you telling me you might be able to fire a fireball out of someone's ass?" she whispered trying to stifle a laugh.

"I haven't attempted it, but I'd take a guess I could. I can also do other things, but only in the pod. You have to connect to the subconscious to produce these effects from the mind. It's difficult



to explain to someone who doesn't do it Elena, sorry if I'm making you feel inferior but I just can't explain how it works. I can't explain what I've seen or how far I can travel. I can see the galaxy from another galaxy if I wanted to. The human mind seems to be able to do things you'd never expect it could do, but it sacrifices the body's energy to produce those effects. Freezing things, setting things on fire through kinetic friction, draining power, moving objects, it all takes energy. Which can, if I do it too much, kill me. There are emergency procedures in place, butâ€¦ they can't keep me up forever if I try something big" he told her.

"Can't youâ€¦ can't you siphon from somewhere?" she asked as she rubbed his shoulder gently. She was worried about him.

"There are nutrient tanks that are connected to the pod and inject into my body while I'm out there viewing, and I usually get bolstered by energy bars before I enter it anyways along with right after. There's a whole medical crew that watches me, every move I make, they can track it to help me out. Riko? The woman you saw when I saved you? That was an AI, and she's a friend of mine. She's a Vindicator class AI, a hunter killer against other AIs. It's why she was able to completely wipe the floor with that Precursor monstrosity in the crystal." Elena was blinking as she listened, working her way through the flood of info he was giving her. He wanted her to understand why he wanted her to not worry about him, and to live a happy life without him.

"So, what, no siphon? You said you can drain power right?" she asked.

"Yes and no. The siphon life thing you'd see in a game or movie? It doesn't exactly work as you'd expect it, but maybe I'm just not doing it right. I can do it, but I don't really get anything out of it. It's not like I'm draining the life force of some monster and feeding it into myself to get stronger, it just drains and I'm sitting there going "ok, it's dead, next" and that's that. I might be missing the connection between it and myself though, the transfer point if you will. If I could figure it out, I'd be a whole lot deadlier, hell, the whole project would have just taken a huge leap" he told her.

"So, once it's gone, it's gone" she almost whispered.

"Well, as I said, this is a project that has been around for a while, and has been slowly improved. This is not a mastered art yet like you flying Elena, we're still learning things every damned day. Hell, you want to know something? I found out how to make Bose-Einstein Condensate in a shield formation around a ship one time to protect against beam weapons or plasma, and Thelma was the one who found out how to tag someone so we can track multiple areas and listen to them at the same time. Aaron found out how to jump between different satellites like an AI and use them to move to specific areas quickly without looking for them" he told her.

"Wow, that'sâ€¦ this is a lot to processâ€¦" she told him.

"Yeah, and that's whyâ€¦ well, I'm worried about you. I don't want you waiting for me in any way shape or form. I work in a classified base that I cannot tell you about, even though I want to. You'd be out in space fighting and you'd never really see me for a long time"

he told her.

"I'd call! I got to talk to you that time and it's not like you're stuck there Seth! Please! Give me something to go on! You gave up on me once. Don't give up on me a second time" she told him and caressed his cheek.

"I'll always watch out for you Elena. I justâ€¦ I'm not giving up on you completely, just keeping you open for someone else to make you happy" he told her. Her face suddenly hardened up. She looked almost angry.

"Fuck this. You know what? No. You don't get to do this" she told him sternly.

"I'm sorry?" he said looking confused.

"Not happening. You say I'm strong? Guess what, I'm fighting for this. Hi, I'm interested in you, and you're interested in me. Look at fucking Buck and Dare! She's ONI and he's an ODST! Renee and John are a Marine and a Spartan! She's clumsy and he's justâ€¦ well, a Spartan! You keep talking about different worlds between us, but all I see is you are fucking scared! I'm not giving up, and I will not be with anyone else damn it" she growled.

"Um, what?" he said. She just had more guts than he did.

"I can't believe you. Leading me on like this and then jumping away, this time I'm catching you when I should have done it before" she said and kissed him on the lips one more time and stood up. She then promptly slapped him hard.

"When you grow some balls and actually fight for me, then come talk to me. You know exactly where I'll be" she told him scowling but no tears. She was determined. He rubbed the side of his face as she unlocked the door and stormed out, with Amber and Elizabeth downstairs.

"I'm going out, and I'll be somewhere tonight so I won't be coming home unless he brings me back just a heads up" she said sternly and opened the door and walked out of the house. Amber and Elizabeth looked up the stairs and through the banister at him rubbing his cheek.

"You fucked up" Amber told him smiling, almost cheerful. She knew he'd go after her. If she didn't give up, he wouldn't.

"Yeah yeah, I know" he responded. They all heard the sound of her pelican fly down and pick her up, and he immediately knew she was going to her hangar. He had remote viewed it once when she was away. It was much nicer than other hangars, with a living space built up inside as well as a shower. The couch was a fold out type and there was a rebuilt kitchen. She could live there if she wanted. There was even a second floor now built above, but she used it for storage at the moment.

"What the hell did you tell her?" Elizabeth growled.

"Something I should have just shut up and not said apparently" he told her.

"You go after her, right now" she ordered.

"I think she needs a bit of time first to calm down, then I'll go. Gimme an hour to figure it out please. I promise this time. I just need toâ€¦ well, I need to think this through" he told her. They nodded as he got up and walked downstairs and went outside, just in time to see Elena fly up, and he could see her look at him in the cockpit. He sighed.

\*\*[Music: Florence + The Machine â€" Shake It Out]\*\*

Elena flew towards the hangar and did a barrel roll through the air, then circled around and landed. She felt stronger now that she had yelled at him. She wasn't going to lose this time. The door closed and she walked out and saw her second home. She laughed and did a little dance. She knew he'd come for her. She needed that. This was the only way she could move forward. They needed each other.

She turned on the stereo and tried to just stand there, but she realized she hadn't exercised in so long. She needed to dance. She did her stretches and then just started dancing to her own rhythm, not salsa, just to herself and not the stereo, the inner song.

Seth shot off with his motorcycle to a candy shop.

\_Go loud go hard for her.\_

He bought a pack of her favorite chocolate, toffee chips and hazel nut.

"For a girl?" the clerk asked.

"Yeah, to say I'm sorry" he grumbled with a smirk.

"Ah, that kind. Yeah, this should make her happy, or get you killed" he laughed.

"I hope it's the former" Seth replied chuckling. He paid and got a bouquet of roses and noticed a gold dipped rose sitting in a box. He bought it and stuck it in the middle of the bouquet.

\_One of a kind.\_

He strapped the bouquet and chocolates into the back container and headed off towards a fine liquor store, not the corner spot people would get average booze.

Elena spun around laughing. She rocked her hips around as she checked the refrigerator and pulled out some chocolate ice cream. She grabbed a spoon and started picking at it smiling.

"500 for that?" Seth said with his eyes wide as he looked at the bottle of wine.

\_She's worth it.\_

"Fine, that thing better let us shoot laser beams from our eyes and fly" he grumbled and bought it, chuckling as he put it in the back.

Elena walked into the Esprit and found the aviator's jacket Andy had gotten her. She picked it up and rubbed her hand over it. She smiled as she walked back out and stood there. She sighed and walked over to the closet and hung it up in the corner. She didn't need it. Andy wasn't hers anymore. She pulled the fixed pelican model and put it on the coffee table. Seth had fixed it, like he fixed just about everything.

Seth drove through traffic and headed towards Moffett Airfield and sat outside the hangar for another fifteen minutes, practicing lines in his head. He knew she wouldn't care what he said, she'd just care about him, he just didn't want to piss her off with some random thing.

Elena looked out the window and saw him pacing around thinking. She saw his mouth moving and barely heard him speaking to himself.

"So, yeah, um, Elena, I, no" "Elena hey, no" "Elena I screwed up, maybe" "Elena, I'm sorry that I said those things, maybe" "Elenaâ€¦ Iâ€¦ am an idiotâ€¦ fuckâ€¦" he grumbled as he tried to find the words. The hangar door opened up and Elena leaned against the frame smirking just as he said the final line.

"Elena, I love you" he said with his hands outstretched to the air and suddenly saw her standing there.

"Oh ballsâ€¦" he suddenly said as they just looked at each other. Elena smiled. Seth just looked awkward and frozen in fear.

"And what three words would I like to hear you say?" she asked still smiling.

"I got chocolate? I got flowers? I got booze? Those work right?" He said grinning. She laughed and winked at him.

"Wrong ones right? Fuckâ€¦ uh, bear in mind, you are the only one I've ever thought of this way, soâ€¦ I don't really have any practice in this regard. So here it goesâ€¦" he told her. She stood there waiting.

"Iâ€¦ love you. I have feelings for you, I've had them since we first met, and they've never died throughout this entire time. When I saw how happy Andy made you, I backed off to make sure you stayed happy. I had seen how love triangles tended to make thingsâ€¦ well, uncomfortable, soâ€¦ I stopped. I'm sorry. Please forgive me for what I said, I was an idiot for what came out of my mouth" he told her from his heart. His head felt like it was going to explode from the stress.

She chuckled and walked over to him and threw her arms around his neck. They just stared at each other face to face smiling.

"I love you too" she replied simply.

\*\*[Music: Demi Lovato â€" Catch Me]\*\*

They both went inside as he heard the stereo. She did a little move with her feet and he laughed. She curtsied and he twirled her with his hand. She laughed as they just sort of danced to their own

tune.

"I didn't know you could ballroom dance" she said.

"I had to for an actual ball room dance. I was scared out of my mind, but I didn't do too bad" he told her smiling.

"Yeah, you're really good. Maybe I should teach you some salsa" she said chuckling.

"I'd like that" he smiled and she wrinkled her nose. He pushed her back and pulled her close again, but twirled her under one arm and twisted his, and walked next to her with his arm behind her back, just like the move she taught Andy. She gasped in surprise and smiled with her mouth agape. They both laughed.

The rest of the night they danced a bit and talked about different things, once playing some video games on the TV, and of course Seth let her win. At one point he skated around on a maintenance board with wheels as she laughed at him while the ARGUS drone pulled him from a rope, and then he soon realized it didn't have brakes. The ARGUS drone flew upwards to keep out of his way, and he just went straight into the hangar door. He flopped on the ground as Elena ran up to him and he played dead.

"Oh godâ€¦ are youâ€¦" she started saying before he smiled and looked up at her.

"Oh you asshole" she growled and put her foot gently on his chest. He grabbed it and pushed it off and she toppled onto him. They both laughed as they got up and she poked him. She tried to tickle him but he tickled back.

By the end of the night they were exhausted. They both just lay on the couch as Elena leaned against him.

"Should we explain to your mother that everything is ok?" he asked.

"No, she can keep guessing for the night. I'd rather just stay here with you" she said looking up from her position.

"Cool beans" he replied. She chuckled.

"So, how do we do this? Long distance relationship?" she asked.

"Iâ€¦ have no fucking clue. How did you do with Andy?" he asked.

"Weâ€¦ wellâ€¦ we both expected me to come home eventuallyâ€¦ and we'd settle down, have a family" she told him.

"Egad, little mes running around? Are you sure you want that? Unless it's just little yous running around, then I'm ok" he told her. She laughed.

"Oh come on, you are not that bad, I love you so that means everybody can love you" she giggled.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence" he rolled his eyes and chuckled. She kissed his cheek and he turned and looked at her, and then kissed her on the lips. They continued to kiss and it started to get passionate. It all happened so fast, and before she knew it, she wasn't waiting until marriage to be with the man she cared about in bed.

## 10. Painful Separation, Joyful Reunion

(Author's Note: I've been getting a hell of a lot of reviews and PMs wondering how I can post so fast, whether these are pre made things. Honestly? I'm writing my ass off every day and I haven't played a video game in a month (I am desperate to play Skyrim but I really want this out of my head and on my computer.) This is like some virus stuck in my head, nibbling away at my brain as I write. Elena is my muse, literally. She's awesome in my head, and there's so many things already planned out through the whole story (Sad stuff hits her like crazy, sorry Elena but the writer has to make this interesting.) This is how I see a kick ass pilot, not just something that shoots at things in the air, but has a life down below, and others are joined into her life and have a life of their own. Seth is just, well, he's got issues just like she does. I want them to have a happy ending! But they might notâ€¦ depends on which ending I choose! Because I am god to them! Ha! Oh shit here they come with the bats againâ€¦ \*runs as Elena and Seth charge after the writer\* "Don't run away! We are your friends! And we hate your knee caps!")

\*\*[0700 hours, March 25\*\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, Moffett Airfield]\*\*

Seth woke up to find Elena tucked into the crook of his arm asleep. The covers were pulled up to her chest as she dreamed on. He smiled and lifted her arm carefully to slip away and put his underwear on. What happened last night between them was incredible. He did his best to make sure she was happy with his effort, and apparently she was seeing stars. He did good from what she told him, though she had never been with anyone else to go for a comparison. They had technically only been together for one night officially, and they hadn't actually gone on a date, and she had already put out for him. Was last night the date? They had known each other for so long, maybe they were due now that she wasn't with Andy, she was with him.

He walked carefully to the kitchen counter and checked for coffee. Elena hadn't checked the stock since she was gone for so long, so it was a bit low. There was an old bag of coffee beans in the freezer, and a can of instant in the cupboard. He sighed. He really wanted to make breakfast for her. He looked at her curled up on the pulled out couch still sleeping with a smile creeping on her face. He did a little "I'm macho" dance because he felt like a million bucks. The girl of his dreams was with him, or he should say he was with the girl of his dreams. She was by far more awesome than he ever could be. She flew state of the art fighters while he sat in a pod. Granted, he crushed transports with his mind and flipped torpedoes around mid-air and sent them back looking like happy faces, but still.

He slipped his shirt back on and got his pants on as well, then put his shoes on and tied them. He crept out of the hangar as silently as he could and got on his cycle. He pulled it back as far as he could

to make sure she didn't wake up and headed out to get some groceries.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena slowly woke up to the smell of two things. Bacon, and coffee. She sat up and looked around and saw Seth at the kitchen cooking. He looked over at her and smiled.

"Coffee?" he asked. She nodded with a smile and got off the couch and looked for her underwear. She found it and put it on, and then found her bra and her shirt. They really had thrown their clothes around. She walked to him as he made an omelet.

"You like omelets don't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, definitely" she giggled as she reached around and hugged him from behind. He moved an omelet to a plate and dropped four pieces of bacon with it and some hash browns. He turned around and put his arms around her.

"So was last nightâ€¦ good?" he asked.

"Oh yeah. I was very happy" she smirked as he leaned down and kissed her.

"Good, cause I gave it my all" he said as he handed her the plate. She walked to the table and sat down with a Carafe of Milk already there.

"Well, um, you may need to tone down your all, causeâ€¦ wow" she whistled.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

"I'm sore, but a good sore. After last night I feelâ€¦ much better. Free" she told him as she took a deep breath. She noticed there was cut up fruit in a bowl on the table. He really went all out.

"I'm glad to hear that" he chuckled.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I feelâ€¦ content. No problems, not a care beyond what I see here, you and me. No work right now, nothing."

Elena smiled and popped a grape into her mouth. She was happy. He walked over with his own plate and sat down.

"Dig in, plenty more where that came from" he told her. They both wolfed down their food and he went to make more.

"So a thought has been crossing my mind, and you don't have to answer it immediately. How do we go about this? You and I? I come and visit often? I get stationed nearby? What?" Elena asked.

"I've been having the same question as well hon. I think I-" he tried to say as his cell rang near the couch.

"I'll get it" Elena said. She walked over and grabbed it and turned

it on.

"Hello?" she answered. No response. "Hello is someone there?" she asked.

"Uh, yes, is this Elena? This isâ€¦ Rikoâ€¦ um, can I speak to Seth?" she heard.

"Sure thing, he's right over here" she replied and handed him the phone.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Hey, it's me" Riko responded.

"Oh hey, how are things over there?" he asked.

"Um, wellâ€¦" she trailed off.

"Is something wrong?" he asked and looked at Elena. She leaned against the countertop and watched him.

"Nothing is wrong, just interesting that Elena answered your phone" Riko replied.

"Oh. Well, she has clearance now, sort of. Hey, can you do me a favor? Can you get the paperwork for Elena to be sanctioned?" he asked.

"Are you kidding me? You and her areâ€¦ congratulations! See, you just had to get kicked in the pants" Riko giggled.

"Yeah yeah, hardie har har. Can you do it?" he asked as he looked at Elena. She gave him a small smile still standing in her underwear and tank top.

"It's done. She has an EBI rating for the project, but not a huge amount. There are classified elements in it she cannot know" Riko told him.

"I figured that. As long as I can at least talk nearby and not lie about it to her, I'm fine with that" he said and smiled at her. He didn't want to lie to her, despite the fact he had already done it at the bowling alley. He did that to protect her from second guessing herself in all her actions.

"Hey, you'll never guess what I found out" Riko said.

"What's that?" Seth said as he grabbed Elena's hand and squeezed it gently. She squeezed back. They entwined their fingers together and he rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb softly.

"Most of your work that is now piling up hint hint? It's being transferred to other remote viewers" Riko told him.

"Oh fuck, look, I'm sorry it's taken so long, I justâ€¦ I couldn't leave ok? I just couldn't" he said and looked at Elena. Worry slowly worked its way over her face.

"Sorry" she whispered.



"Not your fault hon, I wouldn't have had it any other way" he told her seriously. He squeezed her hand again and then brought it up to his lips and kissed it. She gazed at him thoughtfully.

"It's not what you think Seth. New orders. I can't explain it over the cell, strict orders from the big cheese. You'll know when you come back in. Something big is in the works that even Tachi can't get access to, and I even asked Cortana to do a bit of snooping. Whatever the info is, it isn't digital and hidden in areas that there are no sensors or cameras. We AIs are in the dark."

Seth thought for a minute. Why would they transfer all of the work he was doing to track down rebels? There was so much he needed to do to help keep the UEG safe. His work load actually doubled after the Human-Covenant War. There were so few remote viewers, and only three that could manipulate objects, including him. The rest could only provide observation and information gathering, and even then, there were less than ten of the normal ones. Finding remote viewers was incredibly hard, as it wasn't like finding a Spartan. Genes only played a small part in how the person responded inside a cryo pod. Seth even knew there was a Spartan Four as a remote viewer. It depended on how their mind worked. They were still extremely rare.

"Ok, so I'm not doing anything wrong?" he asked.

"Nope, trust me Seth, Metfield thinks you walk on water. He relies on you way too much to try and pull that work without good reason. You're his right hand man. There is no way he'd not think highly of you" Riko told him softly.

"Ok, as long as I'm not pissing off the old man, I still owe him too much to screw things up for him" Seth replied.

"You do not screw things up Seth, that's a fact. When do you expect to come back?" Riko asked.

"When Elena decides to go back up. I hopeâ€¦ I hope it isn't for a few more days" he said quietly, and looked at Elena. She looked a bit sad and looked away from him. They knew eventually they'd have to be apart again. Goodbyes were always painful, especially since they had just gotten together. He was stuck here while she'd be anywhere they needed her squadron. It could be years before they physically saw each other again. Video calls did only so much to keep the pain staved off from being away from the one you love.

"Take your time, she needs to be fully recovered from any effects. And Seth, we still don't know if she has one of thoseâ€¦ you knowâ€¦ still looking. I'd take a guess it isn't timed, but a trigger of some sort. Maybe a signal if it happened, and that's a big if" she told him.

"I can only hope the Precursors don't have that capability" he said and Elena looked confused. He shrugged and rubbed her hand again.

"Your parents have been asking about you, when you'll go visit them" Riko told him.

"Yeahâ€¦ well, I'll have to see about thatâ€¦ they moved to San Diego so it's not like I can just up and see them whenever I please. Work first remember?" he sighed.

"Work second, love first, don't ever forget that" Riko sternly said. He sighed and agreed. He looked up at Elena and smiled. He couldn't stop marveling at how beautiful she was. She didn't wear makeup, she didn't need to. Natural beauty.

"Yeah yeah. I'll see about it after. Hey, we need to go check on her mother again and explain some stuff, anything else I should know?" he asked.

"There are some really interesting surprises you'll want to see when you get back. I don't want to spoil them for you, but there are some improvements that have come out of the skunk works" she giggled.

"For the pod? What are they?" he asked.

"I'm not telling, you have to see for yourself. Go on, go be with your new girlfriend, it can wait" Riko chuckled. She was always understanding. Whoever was used to make her, they were one hell of a person, always caring and yet still willing to tear another AI apart.

He said goodbye and turned off the cell. Elena was quick to lean against him as he leaned against the countertop and was almost laying on top of him with their angle. She kissed him and he kissed back.

"So everything is good?" she asked.

"Yup, at least I think so. Hey, I just realized something, shouldn't you call the big clunky ship you stay in?" he chuckled. She lightly slapped his chest with her hand and smirked.

"It's not clunky, and Dare would scold you to death for saying that. She's state of the art" she giggled.

"So is my refrigerator, but it's still clunky" he told her. She leaned back a bit and eyed him with an amusing look on her face.

"Are you talking about an actual refrigerator or the pod?" she asked.

"An actual refrigerator, not my pod, that thing is in a class of its own in clunkiness" he chuckled and she laughed.

"Clunkiness is not a word" Elena teased him.

"It is now, I made it officially, it will be in the dictionary soon, right next to Chunker, it's like clunker but it loses parts along the way, similar to a jalopy" he told her. She giggled and leaned her forehead against his.

"I love you" she said softly.

"I love you too" he replied and kissed her again.

"We need to get ready, your mother is going to probably make me clean her house for keeping you away without a report" he chuckled.

"Oh come on, we're both grown adults, she can just stuff it if she wants to complain that she didn't get the juicy gossip that we stayed here andâ€¦" she trailed off.

"And?" he smirked.

"You know, I was going to keep waiting until I was married before Iâ€¦ well, had sex. I guess I didn't wait did I?" she asked.

"Are you having regrets?" he asked worriedly.

"No, Iâ€¦ I did it with someone I care about, and like to be around and who understands me. You proved that last night. Iâ€¦" she trailed off again.

"Wait, whaâ€¦ are you wanting me to go get a ring andâ€¦ uhâ€¦" he looked like he was now blushing, red in the face as he tried to figure out if he should haul out and do that. Did people really get married after being together for one night? He didn't really understand since she was his first, but if she wanted to, he didn't want to lose her.

"What? No, no. I'm just thinking about the future that's all. If things continue, and they clearly have considering how long we've known each other, maybe eventuallyâ€¦ I know, I know I sound like one of those clingy girlfriends who immediately wants to get hitched and settle down. I don't think I can really do that yet. But, well, if everything goes well, and from the looks of it I highly doubt it won't, I'll be waiting for that question. You can imagine my answer. Just not now, I don't expect you to jump, but later, if you want toâ€¦ I have no idea why I brought that up, forget I said anything, I really sound weirdâ€¦" she told him. His heart was beating quickly. Could he work up the courage to ask her to marry him? Not right now, they were at the beginning of the relationship. Who could know if things might not turn out well. He prayed to everything that it did work out. He'd do everything he had to make it so.

"When that time comes, you can bet I'll have the ring ready Elena. I pinkie swear" he said and brought up his pinkie. She giggled and ringed her own around his and shook.

"But we don't have to worry about that right now ok? Just live in the moment. I don't want to think about the future until it's here, so right now is right now. Let's go get ready and head to see my mother, but first I get to call the clunker" she told him.

"She better not try and kill me or make me clean her house" he told her.

"Oh, I forgot, how did the game go?" She smirked.

"We were even, and we both missed our last strike. She actually missed one pin, and I got the same because of some kid running out in front of me when I threw my ball" he told her.

"Was the kid ok?" she asked.

"Oh he was fine, I flipped over him and nearly continued with my ball down the lane. Was not happy, but whatever, at least she can't try and punish me for losing as it was a draw" he told her smirking.

"Good" she replied and went to take a quick shower. She had spare clothes in the hangar, while he did not. She came out clean and fresh and he just stood there in what he wore yesterday. She popped a morning after pill quickly. She had gotten some a while ago but never expected to need them.

"Note to self, get more clothes" he chuckled.

"We could all go shopping today if you want" she grinned.

"I choose my own clothes hon, don't go nitpicking at me when I do ok? We're not married yet" he told her. She laughed and nodded.

"You aren't going to wear that sweater are you?" she giggled.

"Ha ha, practicing will do you no good" he told her smirking.

"Well, it's still a good idea. I know you have to watch how much you buy considering the amount of space on your cycle, but still, a few spares while we stay shouldn't be bad" she told him. He nodded as she called the Conundrum and they walked out of the hangar and she closed the door. They both got onto his cycle and headed back to her mother's house. Things would be far more relaxed now that Elena had come to terms with her feelings, in both Seth and herself. She still cared about Andy, but no longer felt for him the way she felt for Seth. It was only three days ago that she found out, but she had moved forward, just like he did. A new page was now being written for her.

\*\*[1100 hours, March 29\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Seth and Elena had packed up. They had taken a week off to get Elena sorted out with her family and friends, to visit and get her back up to snuff. Her medical exam was complete, as was her review before a council involving Admiral Hood as one of the reviewers. They all agreed she was fit to come back, though under temporary watch due to her connection to the Precursors. They never told her that the watch was authorized not by the UNSC, but by GRID themselves in the background, and she was never told that it was because of worry about her potentially having a trigger inside her that could turn her against her friends. If, after a future Precursor attack that she responded well to it and no conditions arose, that she would be capable of reacting without a watch as a General would.

Elena felt the weight of being a tier above Colonel. She had reviewed the information quickly that was given to her. She didn't just have her wing under her command anymore, she now had three wings she had to handle. She was surprised what she had to control and now had to work with. Her original squadron was only one of the things she had to watch. Now, she had three squadrons per group, and there were two groups per wing, so she had eighteen squadrons she was watching, or 90 craft total. Not all of them were fighters, as in her wing there was an entire squadron devoted to Vulture gunships for ground support

while her Black Blade Mk IIs watched the skies. She obviously had subordinates to help control everything, but it seemed daunting now that she was a grade higher. She was only three grades below the top of the top, and she'd be talking to them on an almost daily basis for the fleet.

Seth was more than supportive, and helped her collect her new uniforms and clothes befitting a General. She was the lowest rank of General, but she still was just that, a General. She had to prove she had what it took to do her job. If she didn't, she had others helping her to learn, and one of them was Seth. He had whispered to her once that he was a registered four star general, though he was a civilian. It gave him full control of the fleet if Admiral Hood wasn't there or if another General of the Air Force or Army showed up. He more than likely would never attempt that, as his job was different than theirs, but if he needed it, others would have to listen to his orders, even her if he told her. He even could have the Secretary of Security, Metfield intercede and speak on his behalf towards anyone higher than him. Seth didn't show it much, as he was pretty laid back, but he had quite a bit of sway and power, he just didn't like using it. There didn't seem to be a point for him. Why play with it if it didn't serve a purpose? If it didn't get him nearer to his goal, whatever that was, then there was no use telling someone to do something. He was a civilian government agent unless he needed to use the rank.

Elena walked down the stairs wearing her new uniform. The week was over, and she had spent some memorable moments with her family. Milo and Jack had come down and spent the last four days with them, and Seth seceded from Milo's old room, despite Elena's protests. Milo didn't mind letting him stay, and even offered to sleep on the couch, but Seth wouldn't have it. On the first night for him sleeping on the couch, she flicked his ear and told him to get up and come with her into her room and sleep alongside her. He obeyed smiling. He wasn't going to argue with her.

She stood proper at the bottom as her mother took a picture of her wearing her uniform.

"I never would have expected this, my little girl is a General" Elizabeth was nearly bursting into tears. Milo and Jack both saluted her, and she saluted back and told them to stand at ease.

"I'm not a General in this house, I'm your daughter dad" she told him.

"You're my fly girl, that's what you are" he chuckled. She giggled as Milo and Jack stood next to her for another picture, and then they waited for Seth to come down from the bathroom. He stepped out wearing his all black GRID uniform, with no badge telling which agency he belonged to. Everyone gasped as he strode down the stairs in black shined shoes and a black trench coat. He really looked the part of a spook. He looked very impressive. There was not one single fiber of cloth that was any color other than black, and he didn't have a badge area to display commendations or medals. GRID didn't use that, they were government, and anything they did was not allowed to be talked about, not even ONI could do anything to them.

"You look really nice" Elena said as she checked his black tie over his black shirt. She could only imagine how that was in the summer.

She didn't need to really play with his tie, she just did it to get close to him, as he was used to formal settings because of what he did. He had told her over the days he had met the President of the United States, the President of the United Nations and just about every Secretary to both the United States and the UEG on more than a dozen occasions. He was on a first name basis with Metfield and President Harvin for the United Nations.

"Look who's talking, you look incredible" he said and saluted her.

"You don't need to salute me, you're a civilian" she chuckled and gazed at him.

"Force of habit to officers in your pay grade and above. I don't let on where I stand in the rank tier" he whispered.

"Ah, well, you hide it well" she whispered back and hugged him. Her smile was slowly fading as she realized she'd be taken from him, and thrown out into battles while he was on Earth. His smile faded as well as they knew now that they might not see each other for a while. They were being torn apart from each other because of orders, just like Renee and John had happen to them so long ago.

They heard the honk of the limo waiting for them outside. Seth's Motorcycle was transported for him by a pelican flying in and taking it back to the base.

"That's our ride" Jack said softly. He hated seeing his daughter like this. She had found love again and now she couldn't stay with him. She had even thought of retiring almost immediately just to stay on Earth, to stay with Seth. As the days went by, she realized just how much he listened to her, always remembering what she said, always caring about her feelings and watching how he reacted to them. He didn't just tell her to relax like Andy did, he listened and tried to help her with whatever she was thinking or doing. Elena could almost feel her heart breaking as she woke up in the morning and realized this was the final day.

"Come on, we don't separate just yet, we're in the same car remember?" he whispered to her.

"Yeah, but it doesn't make this any easier" she whispered back as she hugged him. He kissed her forehead as the others watched, Elizabeth and Jack holding hands.

"Hey, you aren't leaving each other, you'll just be away in body, not in spirit or mind. You'll see each other again" Jack told them.

"Yeah" Elena sighed and looked at them and then at Seth. He nodded as they walked to the door. Elizabeth said her goodbyes there, crying because she wasn't going with them. They would be dropping Elena, Jack and Milo off at Vandenberg AFB to be picked up and taken to the Conundrum, where Elena would be the top ranked officer on board. Admiral Hood was going to be on the Infinity. Afterwards, Seth would be driven back to an unknown location and then picked up by a pelican, then taken to SRI-2 DELTA. Afterwards, neither of them knew.

Elena could be shipped out with the next fleet operations towards the brute borders, or they might be sent to Sangheilios for something, or kept in some unknown area to protect against Precursors. They might even be sent to stop insurgents in an area. Seth, on the other hand, would disappear into classified and do not tell territory, seeking insurgents and either taking them out himself or reporting the information back.

They all got into the limo as their things were loaded into the trunk, and it drove off. Elena's mother watched with tears in her eyes and waved goodbye to her daughter. She hoped the next time she came home it would be on normal terms and not someone telling her that her daughter was dead. After her previous brush with death, she realized she had to do everything she could to keep herself safe, to come back to the ones she loved and cared about. She watched out of the back window at the receding view of her mother and the house she grew up in, her home. The feeling was wrenching at her inside as she turned around and looked down at the floor. Seth put his arm around her and hugged her close. She leaned against his shoulder and he leaned his head against hers.

"Everything is gonna be fine sweetheart, I'll find some way to see you, somehow" he whispered to her. She listened to him spout hope to her that may not come true. It was still thoughtful nonetheless.

"I just don't want to leave if I can avoid it, butâ€¦ I guess I have toâ€¦ do I really have what it takes to be a General if this is how I act?" she asked him.

"You do and you know it. I know you'll be incredible. Stay strong like you always have been" he told her. She nodded as they drove towards Vandenberg AFB. The trip was mostly uneventful, and when they finally came in view, Elena felt they were near their last few minutes together. The limo stopped and the doors opened, and Seth walked Elena down the hallway to the shuttle. She held on tight, not wanting to let go at all. She knew that once she let go, she would be in that shuttle and leaving him.

They entered into the shuttle bay and stopped. Jack and Milo shook hands with Seth and then hugged him, Milo hugging him like a brother almost and Jack like a son. They walked to the shuttle and let Elena stand there with him.

"I'll miss you" she told him as she faced him.

"I'll miss you too" he told her and she could feel herself already choking up.

"I love you" she said and hugged him close.

"I love you too Elena" he whispered into her ear. She pulled away as tears were forming in her eyes, and he brushed them away.

"Hey, stay strong ok? You'll be back before you know it" he chuckled, but he felt the pain too.

"If I don'tâ€¦" she started to say.

"Fuck that, don't you dare say it, because I won't make the same mistake Andy did. I will downright decline that promise damn it, so

don't even try it cause you'll just insult me. I'll never give up on you, ever. If anything happens I'll be at the forefront looking for you, and I won't rest until I find you. Don't ever give up got that? You're coming back to me, or I'm going to you, one way or another" he told her. She looked into his eyes and suddenly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, a long slow kiss. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed back, and then leaned his forehead against hers.

"Time to go" he whispered.

"I don't want to" she almost cried.

\*\*[Music: Regina Spektor "The Call"]\*\*

"You have to. You know you do" he whispered back. She finally nodded and slowly pulled away from him. His hands traced down her arms and finally to her own hands, as slowly they left each other's grasp. It felt like someone had cut Elena's heart in two as she walked backwards towards the shuttle halfway and then walked the rest of the way facing it. She kept glancing over her shoulder as he just stood there, watching. He wouldn't leave until she was in the air. Elena walked up the stairs and into the shuttle, and then sat down in her seat. She strapped herself in and looked out the window at him standing there.

"Sierra 1-4-6 ready for takeoff" the pilot said as the shuttle closed up the door and pressurized, and then it lifted off, out of the large hole above and finally took off towards the ship. It was done. Seth was standing there without her. He sighed and turned around and walked out of the bay and outside, and back to the limo. He looked up and could see the shuttle turning into a speck in the distance.

"Time to go sir" the driver said.

"Yeah. Time to go" he responded and got inside the vehicle.

Elena sat in the shuttle as it shot towards the \_Conundrum\_. She felt like shit. She wanted to break down and cry, though she had to control herself because she would be in front of a welcome party on board. They normally did it for anyone beyond a Captain or Colonel. She was now a General.

The shuttle pulled into the hangar and landed easily. The doors opened and a naval officer emitted a pipe aboard sound from a boatswain's call. Two files of soldiers stood at attention as Elena exited the shuttle and walked down the steps and to the deck.

"Flag Officer on deck!" someone yelled as everyone stood at a crisp salute. Captain Dare stood at the front along with Colonel Falken, both saluting. Elena walked towards them and saw Aldric, Sarah, Roberts, Merricks, Jacobs, Buck, John, Kelly, Linda, Fred, Ash, Tom, Lucy, Renee, Jones, and a number of others in the back lines, behind the two files making the alley she walked through. She gave them a small smile as they returned it, and Colonel Falken made a small clearing of her throat as the squadron responded to Elena. She wanted them to be proper, but Elena wanted a warmer welcome.

"Welcome back to the \_Conundrum\_ Brigadier General Gripen" Dare said



still in salute.

"At ease" she replied and smiled. Everyone stood at attention.

"Full at ease" she told them and looked behind her. Everyone sighed and looked at her.

"So, had time to wind down?" Dare asked her.

"Yeah, wellâ€¦ I guess. What's happening now is what I need to focus on. What is happening with the ship Captain?" she asked.

"Ma'am, we will be leaving with the rest of the fifth fleet once we have fully prepared. We are still taking on supplies, and the new slip space drives are being installed" she told her.

"Veronica, I'm still me, though thanks for putting the full effort into it" Elena smiled to her. Despite the fact she was not with Seth, she was among friends. It would tide her over until she could see him again.

"It's good to see you're ok now Elena" Dare finally sighed and told her.

"Yeah. Iâ€¦ had some things to take care of down there, and now I'm ship shape" she responded. She wasn't in ship shape, she was a wreck because she couldn't be with the one she cared about, but she was hiding it quite well.

"General, this is Colonel Falken, she has command of the 988th tactical under you" Dare told her. Elena looked at her as she was still at attention even though she was told full at ease.

"Ma'am, it is an honor to meet you" she replied still staring forward.

"Oh, I highly doubt it's an honor for you, but whatever, I'll be civil" she smiled. Falken glanced over at her. She had kept in touch with Aldric while she was down below handling her personal problems. Everyone knew she was a stronger woman for it now that she had done things with her family.

"Ma'am?" she asked with a slight hint of worry in her eyes. She didn't know that Elena was annoyed with how she handled her squadron. It took her some effort to get her pilots out of their shells, and she had them back in them in less than a week. She was more than annoyed, she was righteously pissed, but she didn't show it.

"I said I highly doubt that as from what I heard, you didn't seem to care about a corpse floating in space?" Elena repeated her words that Falken had said to Aldric. No one said a word.

"Ma'am, this would be better talked about in private" Colonel Falken said and looked at Elena. Elena knew protocol.

"Very well. Captain" Elena said and Dare looked at everyone else.

"Dismissed, back to your duties" she barked. Everyone broke file and walked in different directions.

"Good to have you back Elena" Buck whispered over her shoulder.

"Good to be back Eddy" she replied and smiled to him.

"Yeah, great to have our commander back" Jacobs beamed at her. The welcome she gained was huge, far more welcoming than Colonel Falken had gained. Elena was a hero, a legend, and was practically placed on par with the Master Chief for her capability, along with the Spartans. Colonel Falken had so far proved not worth the rank.

Elena motioned towards the door as Dare and Falken walked through it, as Elena wanted Veronica to be a part of this. She had more information about what was happening on her ship. Elena followed both of them to the observation room. Elena was in charge now, by a long shot. What she says goes on the ship, regardless of what Dare would say except if it involved putting her crew in harm's way. Elena would never do that. She was Dare's friend, and had a good head on her shoulders.

"Kindly explain what it is you are doing with my wing Colonel" she said simply and calmly. She had talked to Seth and Admiral Hood on how she should act. Admiral Hood took her under his wing for just that. He knew she would probably not even stay a Brigadier General with how she responded to different problems, and this was just another step in her career. She didn't know if that was true or not, but she didn't want to let him down. She still wanted a life outside of the UNSC though, and a family of her own.

"I have been whipping them into shape ma'am, and allowing them to reach the top of their abilities" Falken responded, at attention still. She seemed to never be at ease, always military. Elena had a cool demeanor about her. She was holding all the cards, Seth made sure of it. One good thing about having a spy as a boyfriend was that she had access to anything that pertained to her, including her squadron. Her cool demeanor was about to turn into pure anger soon.

"Really? From what I've been able to find out, you sent one of my pilots to the medical bay! You completely disregarded all information regarding contact with a superior hostile foe and you disobeyed direct orders from the commanding officer in a battle that nearly cost the same pilot her life!" Elena barked. Colonel Falken stood there, and she could see the very slight flinch from her keen eyes and lenses. She was being reprimanded. She wasn't expecting that.

"What the hell were you thinking? That now you have control and you think you can do better? That you could just slip in to one of the best squadrons in the fleet, probably in the UNSC, and think you can improve on what I worked so hard to do? To get those five pilots to work as a team and do what no other person could even attempt out there, and that was fight a significantly more advanced foe and do it without casualties! So far my wing, not yours, has suffered not one casualty. We suffered damage yes, but not one life lost! And you nearly caused that!" Elena yelled at her.

"Just how good do you really think you are Colonel? You think you can best me? I'm fucking younger than most main line pilots and I'm a

General, I've taken out an entire fleet before you even thought of transferring here! And if I find out that you screw with my pilots one more time without damn good reason and don't give them the respect they deserve for their actions, I will bury you. Do you understand? I will personally make sure you are transferred to some backwater station flying some clunker for the rest of your life!" Elena roared. There was a fire in her eyes, no, not a fire, a blazing inferno. She wouldn't let this subordinate destroy what she worked to build. Admiral Hood would have been proud if he was there.

Colonel Falken didn't show it much, but she was definitely fearful of Elena. Elena was two inches taller than the redhead, and though Falken looked almost like a supermodel, she was wearing makeup while Elena wasn't, and she was definitely not as confident now as she was before. She had expected to be praised for her efforts to work Raven squadron into something better.

"Yes ma'am, I regret my actions towards them. I will endeavor to do better by you, truly. I apologize for what I have been doing. Had I been more alert in Lieutenant Reist's condition, that would not have happened. Had I read the data pertaining the alien forces, I would have been more proficient in assisting in defense. I failed, and I will do my utmost best to repair what I have done" Colonel Falken managed to say. For all intents and purposes, Falken had never seen Elena until today, and thought Colonel Gripen was a man. She had never seen a picture of her from the past, and wasn't allowed to read her file due to it being classified. She was expecting to wow and impress a male officer above her, and continue doing what she was doing. Elena had just knocked over her dream of that happening like it was a house of cards with her battle tank made of real life. You don't treat subordinates under your command poorly. Especially hers.

"I hope to god you do. Dismissed" Elena growled. Falken saluted her and Elena just stood there. Falken hesitated and walked out of the room.

"You know, there was a bet going out through the fleet to see how well you would do as a General now. I'm pretty sure most of the crew and I each just won 200 credits" Dare chuckled as she crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the door like it was Falken herself. Elena stood there and a small smirk crossed her lips.

"You enjoyed that didn't you?" Dare asked smiling.

"Yes I did. Yes I did indeed" she replied and let out a deep breath.

"Are you alright?" Dare asked.

"That's the first time I have ever had to yell at a subordinate. I shouldn't have lost my head, I should have kept my temper under control, but I'll be damned if she hurts Sarah again. God damn it, why didn't she read her medical file? I did, I knew she needed time to get her food down! I saw it the first day when she tried to make a good impression! She was wobbling! I never let her do that again!" she growled.

"I doubt Aldric would let that happen. Her and him have gotten a bit close" Dare told her.

"You meanâ€¦| good for him then, and her. He compliments her in a lot of ways. He'll be a good influence on her" Elena replied.

"No, you will be a good influence on her, now that you're back" Dare said and patted her on the shoulder. Elena sighed and looked at her.

"I hope I can be forgiven for leaving everyone back then to do what I did. I did it for them, for everyone" she told her.

"They know, and respect you all the more for it. You're a hero Elena, don't forget that. They look up to you. And now you'll do right by them yet again, like most officers strive to do with members under their command. Show them what you've always been made of Ghost" Dare told her. Elena chuckled and nodded.

"Thanks" she replied.

"Welcome. Now I need to see to the sitreps on the bridge. Your old quarters are waiting for you if you want them, and an office if you need it" Dare told her.

"You know I hate offices, I don't see a point to them. I'm still talking to people near my terminal in a chair. No, I don't want an office, I'll take my quarters though" she chuckled. She was the same Elena, the same commander that had a down to earth way of treating her pilots with respect, and they did well because of that.

"I figured as much. I'll see to it your things are sent to it, and the office still stands if you need it. You should settle in, walk around if you want, take a nap, General" Dare chuckled. Elena rolled her eyes and sighed. Dare walked out of the room and Elena just sat down in one of the chairs and looked out the window, thinking.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Immediate â€" Imperitum]\*\*

Seth flew towards the desert in an unmarked pelican as he saw two also unmarked prowlers move away. He knew they were GRID already, and they landed carefully. He jumped out of the cargo bay and walked towards the opening that was now appearing on the ground, hidden from anyone as the doors opened. He walked onto it and the lift dropped quickly, the doors above closing, sealing him in. He felt comfortable regardless, as this was a second home to him.

The lift stopped and he walked off, as Riko suddenly appeared next to him and walked with him, not saying a word. He turned a corner and the doors opened for him immediately. Multiple heavy autocannons were attached to the ceiling and tracking movement, but none aimed at him, as both Riko and Tachi controlled them.

"He's here isn't he?" Seth asked.

"Yup, waiting for you in the lab" she told him. He nodded as she continued by his side, and just as the last door opened to the lab, he stepped in. What he saw made him stop in his tracks. The pod was filled with someone else, and there was another team of scientists

and medical personnel working in the room. Metfield was standing there waiting for him with two guards.

"Well hello there my boy! Good to see you finishing up with your girlfriend, how is she?" he asked. He already knew, but he was asking out of being personable. He always did that with Seth.

"She's doing well sir, she's probably on board the Conundrum as we speak" he told him.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. Ah, you're probably wondering what's going on over there?" Metfield asked as he thumbed behind him.

"I'd like to know, yes sir" he replied.

"Seth" he said, and waved his index finger in the air as if scolding a child.

"Sorry, Richard" he replied.

"Good. Now, what's happening shouldn't really come as a surprise to you. Before you say anything, you are not being punished for any wrong doing. You have performed extremely well over these years, and have done more than your fair share of work. I thank you for that. However, from reports and what we have gained involving your girlfriend, Elena, we believe it is in our best interests to continue efforts to contain the Precursor threat."

Seth seemed confused.

"I don't think I quite understand Richard, what's with replacing me with someone else in the pod?" he asked.

"It's not your pod anymore Seth. Your pod is being transferred as we speak. The new generation three is functional" he told him. Seth gawked. He had heard the generation three model was in development, but he had no idea it was finished by skunk works. The design was streamlined, with cleaner and far more efficient fluid transfer, better filtration system, faster nutrient injection capabilities and far more responsive emergency controls. All in all, he would be able to stay in the pod for longer without using any energy, upwards of 72 hours, as well as last longer in assisting forces in combat with the faster nutrient injections. The emergency systems would significantly improve how quickly he could get medical treatment if he needed it.

"That's good news Richard, but where?" he asked. He had heard of a few new bases being built around the globe, one in Germany, another in Siberia, and another in Antarctica. Was he being transferred?

"Guess, just take a guess Seth. Remember, you are not being punished. Just take a wild guess" he smiled at him and winked.

"What? you can't mean?" he said, not able to get the words out. He was going to be transferred to Elena's ship? His heart was beating a mile a minute. He'd get to see her again.

"Yes, that's correct. The Conundrum is going to be taking the entire team on board. The Precursors are a threat that we cannot

ignore, and if you can provide a means of defense against them, whether assisting Raven squadron or providing advanced reconnaissance for the fleet, it would be very useful. You're going to be the resident remote viewer there, and a tier 0 asset. I cannot explain how important it is that you survive and come back. All information you can gather would be highly beneficial to provide a defense against the Precursors, as we know very little about how they work or their technology." Seth was almost in shock.

"But sir, isn't the Conundrum leaving orbit soon?" he asked.

"They can't leave if they don't have a slip space drive installed now can they? Who do you think is installing it and providing it Seth? And we're providing an improvement in their second R&D lab. It is away from Dr. Wright's lab to make sure he doesn't interfere. That is where the generation three stasis system will be located, as well as the AIs and spare reactors for the power. The equipment is going to be implemented as soon as you are aboard" Metfield told him smiling. Seth could hug him right now, he was so happy. Riko was coming with him, as was Tachi, and Dr. Montez and Jenny. His team was going to be ready to rumble next to Elena's squadron.

"Thank you sir!" he replied with a grin on his face. Metfield chuckled.

"I take care of my own Seth, and you guys take care of me. I cannot tell you how important it is for you to send whatever you can about the enemy forces back. Anything you find could be useful against them" the Secretary of Security told him.

"Yes sir!" he replied.

"Oh, and check the data Dr. Antonio Montez sent for you involving the new upgrades. Skunk works was able to find out some impressive things. Do you remember the beacon?" he asked.

"We used it to draw the Precursors out to retrieve Elena's body, yes" Seth replied.

"They believe we were using it the wrong way. They've implemented it into the new pod. It doesn't improve the strength of your abilities, it lowers how much stress your body takes from using them. I don't know the full details of it just yet as I am not exactly technically inclined, but I did read some of it. There is a miniaturized version of it now connected to the pod. It should significantly improve on how harsh yourâ€¦ manipulations are on your body. I didn't exactly read all of the numbers, but it looks as if it will drop the effects by half. Should give you something to go on next time" Metfield explained.

"Incredibleâ€¦ so it doesn't increase strength, justâ€¦ lowers energy burnâ€¦ at least it can't be used by the enemy sir" he replied.

"Yes, that means it most likely will have no use for them, but that doesn't mean they won't have other ways to fight back. Be on your toes out there. Also, we will be responding not just towards the Precursors, but towards rebel Sangheili as well. Your duties have been mitigated, but not dissolved. With our alliance with the Sangheili, you are still a remote viewer to find enemies of the UEG,

and if you come across any rebel forces or insurrectionists, you know what to do. The work that was transferred from you to others is still open for your completion if you find them. There are still GRID ships out there, and if you contact them, they're sure to assist. You still have a black card on this Seth, full resources. Good luck, but I doubt you'll need it" Metfield told him. He patted him on the shoulder and walked out of the lab.

"Road trip!" Riko cheered. If Seth could high five her, he would have.

"Bring your sunblock and bug repellent Seth, we're going to be roughing it on board" Tachi chuckled from nearby.

"As long as I don't have to go commando, I'm a happy spook" he laughed at them.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Mika & Redone "Kick A\*s"]\*\*

Four pelicans shot up from the atmosphere, black in color with almost no writing on the outside. Their only insignia was GRID written on the sides in very dark paint, and they were armed to the teeth, almost as well built as Vulture gunships. They landed easily, as they had guaranteed clearance. The ROROs opened and Ezekiel and the rest of his maintenance crew watched in awe as soldiers dressed in full battle armor walked out without any insignia carrying equipment from the pelicans.

"Who the hell?" Ezekiel said as Seth walked out in his uniform.

"Which way to the 2nd R&D lab?" Seth asked him. He pointed.

"Thanks" he replied and followed the men as the scientists and medical team were hot on his heels with medical equipment.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Elena sat in her quarters reading through reports sent to her. Jones was in one of the wings under her command, and he had said hello to her. She personally made sure he was a Commander now, as his superior was actually now dead from the fight against the fighters that she was controlling. She knew he'd take care of his pilots. She had almost an entire wing of Sabres and Super Long Sword IIs, and an entire group of Vultures. Wing, Group, Squadron, in descending priority and strength. She was going over the transfer of aviators to his wing as they had lost some pilots in the fight, and suddenly she got a ring on her door alarm.

Jones stood up and opened the door. Aldric was standing there.

"Yes?" Elena asked.

"You should see this ma'am. There are unknown forces, almost numbering a company loading things into 2nd R&D. I saw a pod go by of some sort" he told them. Elena's eyes went wide. No way. It couldn't be.

She got up immediately and ran down the hallway to the lift.

"Make a hole!" she yelled as marines backed to the walls as Aldric and Jones followed her. They entered and headed down to the deck where 2nd R&D was. They opened the door and ran to the lab entrance.

"Authorization required" the door systems said.

"Brigadier General Elena Gripen, Authorization code Alpha Tango Whiskey six two niner Delta" she said.

"Authorization not accepted. Please wait" the door responded.

"Not accepted? What the fuck? You have access to every room in this ship! How the fuck is your auth code not functioning?" Jones asked.

"I don't know, but something is going on" Elena told him. Tachi suddenly showed up.

"I'm sorry miss, but this place is currently considered unauthorized to UNSC officials by orders of-" Tachi started saying. Riko suddenly jumped out of nowhere and slapped him upside the head.

"Knock it off dickhead! She's with him! Sorry Elena, door's open" Riko growled as she glared at Tachi holding the back of his head, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"What? They can't go in!" he told her.

"She has clearance dumb ass! She gets to go! The others can't!" she snapped.

"Well I guess I didn't get that memo! Fine! You two stay here, General Gripen can enter" he winced as he still held his head. More than likely the strike was a minor virus attack that he was cleaning up from Riko.

"You're all good Elena, go on in" Riko told her and smiled.

"Thanks" she replied and walked through the first pair of doors and had them close behind her.

"Now starting cleaning process. Engaging emission of Trychlorhecticide and Sectizine. Scanningâ€¦ no contaminants detected. You are now free to enter" the dumb computer said. Vacuum systems sucked out the gases which Elena was capable of breathing in, as they were nontoxic to her but would more than likely kill any bug or bacteria on her. The pressurized doors opened and she walked in to nearly gasp at the sight in front of her. Standing in the middle of the room, was Seth. He was looking at a data pad as Montez and Dmitri were looking at him.

"Well, we could connect to the power grid here and here, and then move the cores to here. Let's do that, and hope we don't blow the whole thing to hell. I do not want the Captain of this ship pissed cause we blew the lights out on this deck" he said. They nodded as Dmitri ordered two soldiers to move some equipment. He turned left



and walked towards some equipment to open the crate. Elena walked towards him as he stood up and walked with a tool. He suddenly looked up and saw her.

"Oh, hey there" he said surprised. She immediately ran and leapt onto him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He grappled her and hugged her as she just hung from him.

"I missed you, and all you can say is hey there?" she whispered.

"I was only away from you for like five hours" he chuckled.

"It felt like forever" she told him.

"Well, now there is no forever. We have orders to be on the ship. I am an official remote viewer on loan to the fleet, temporarily. Our primary mission is to catch Sangheili rebels as well as beat the snot out of Precursors, as well as provide nice little bonuses to the fleet defenseâ€¦ and Raven Squadron, specifically a Brigadier General" he told her smiling.

"Really? So, you're staying?" she asked, smiling as she looked into his eyes.

"Since I'm connected to you, I go where you go. Priority is to retrieve information on the aliens in any way possible, technology or otherwise. I will, however, not always be running alongside you out there. Our primary concern is the security of the UEG, and if something is considered higher priority, we may not be keeping you company some times. You'll have to feel lonely without me and suck it up" he told her.

"Boo hoo, as long as it's only temporary I can live with that. We've survived without you before, we can survive again, though your help is greatly appreciated. As long as you come back each time, I'm content" Elena half said professionally and the other half she was just joking.

"You're welcome" he replied and grinned. She leaned her forehead against his as they just looked at each other. Dr. Montez cleared his throat and they both broke from each other's hold.

"Sorry. Um, yes, General Gripen, we're still under construction, it should take a day to finish the implementation of our equipment, we shouldn't be a bother to the rest of the crew" he said professionally.

"Yes, of course, let Captain Dare know if you need anything. And do see me for your quarters accommodations" she told him smiling.

"Ah, yes, I'll do that, thank you. Just mine correct?" he asked.

"Yes, the others should have it easily done by Cherry, the ship's AI" she told him and winked.

"That's good to hear. Well, I'll let you get back to your duties, we shouldn't keep you. Busy busy" he said and leaned in.

"I'll definitely see you later ok? Once this is all done. No

worries?" he said softly.

"Of course. Deck 2, Room 30" she replied.

"Good. I'll have my stuff sent there then" he smiled.

"Cool beans" she chuckled, remembering what he had said before.

"I'll let you get back to your duties then. Love" he told her and patted her gently on her shoulder.

"Yeah, love" she repeated and smiled. Elena walked away and then turned around and looked at him. He smiled and nodded. She nodded back and then walked fully out of the lab and into the decontamination room, and finally outside.

"So what's going on in there?" Jones asked.

"I can't tell you, classified" she told him.

"Really?" he asked.

"Yup. Really. Let's get back to our duties, we were in the middle of the reports. Aldric, don't worry about it, everything is fine, nothing to worry about. Go take care of Sarah ok?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am" he replied and walked off. Elena and Jones walked back to the lift and entered, to get back to the reports.

Things were going to be very interesting now on board the ship with a CENTURION remote viewer on board alongside a PROJECT SHADOW ace pilot.

(Author's Note: The macho man dance is just like the village people by the way. You know, I got the Captain Picard Vibe right after I realized what was going on with Elena and the Precursors. Picard and the Borg. No, she doesn't have a connection to them, I'm nipping that in the bud right here and now. The trigger though, ehâ€| maybe, maybe not. And now Seth is on board the ship! He should have stayed below, don't know why they didn't let him stay underground protected considering he could just remote view outside to get info. Maybe next chapter might explain it! Maybe not! I'm evil that way! I'mâ€| oh crap, they're coming after me with the bats again! \*Runs as Seth and Elena charge after him\*)

## 11. Fight Club

\*\*[2216 hours, March 29\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, UNSC Infinity class carrier \*\*\_\*\*Conundrum\*\*\_]\*\*

Seth was still working through data pads like they were popcorn. One was medical, another was his personal, another was personnel, another was classified intel, and another was supply structure. Each data pad was devoted except his personal one. They needed to keep everything under control. GRID worked as a fine tuned and well oiled machine, and always would be. It wasn't just Seth running the show, he relied on the medical team with Jenny and Dr. Montez overseeing it, a maintenance crew from their own skunk works to keep the pod

maintained, a supply line to the ship for their own personal resources required, satellite response, AIs that worked alongside Riko and Tachi, and ground force intelligence groups and stealth operatives. The list continued beyond that, but it wasn't just what was seen on board. Raven Squadron was small and easy to maintain compared to the CENTURION program, though the scope at which they could respond was immensely broader. They just weren't combat.

Seth had once told Elena to think of him as a buffer character in a video game. He was a person who simply provided advantages in the field of combat, and could perform somewhat in that regard, but wasn't originally supposed to due to low energy. He figured himself to be similar to a mage that didn't actually do combat magic, simply produced gravity force related responses to an encounter or worked with the laws of physics they knew about. Now with the improvements in energy drain, he might be able to produce a wider range of effects and last longer in the field while assisting combat forces. He still couldn't just waltz in and start crushing entire fleets with his mind or planets, but he could at least assist to a much larger degree than he previously could. He would remain careful though.

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. He and Dmitri had continued connecting wiring and circuits inside the lab to allow outside communication with GRID satellites hidden through the galaxy, and they needed to keep them hidden while also sending information through them from a UNSC ship. It was proving a bit difficult, but they were working on it. If it didn't succeed, they would scrap the idea and simply have a courier service transfer information between the ship and wherever they needed to send the information. All of it was considered classified, regardless of if it was rebel intel or how many bites someone took to finish a granola bar.

Seth looked at his chrono and realized it was past 10. He sighed and told Dmitri they'd pick up tomorrow. Everything involving the pod was officially completed, the lab was set up, it was simply working on the GRID transfer systems or security features for the room. Seth didn't actually like UNSC ships; they were too defenseless, with no automated defenses beyond drones. GRID ships had auto turrets, security storage pods hidden in walls for potential boarding, emergency vacuum suits as well as triple layered doors to protect against a multitude of problems. They also had LED lights all over the place with backup power sources if boarding happened, to stop lighting issues as well as screw with the enemy's vision by being able to strobe. Seth even knew how to produce a strobe light out of nowhere in space to do the same thing to fighters, or create heat sources that weren't there. He had made a flash of blinding light one time as well as screwed with sensors to make it look like the enemy was surrounded.

They both walked out of the room and were decontaminated, and went their separate ways until the morning. Seth walked to the lift and headed up to deck 2, and then walked to room 30. He rang the door alarm and waited. Elena opened the door for him and he smiled.

"You are extremely late mister" she smirked.

"Sorry, we're still not fully operational just yet. We'll be done by tomorrow, I'm sure of it" he told her and chuckled.

"Well, as long as it isn't keeping you from coming to bed. I was

worried about you" she told him.

"You could always check on me, you're allowed remember? Don't worry, we're already done with the main components and we're just setting a few other things up. Sorry I didn't come to dinner, we just munched in there while working" he told her.

"I sadly missed dinner too and ate while getting Jones's wing set up. They took a lot of casualties fightingâ€| wellâ€| meâ€|" she said softly and looked away.

"Hey, don't blame yourself, you were being deceived. They used you" he told her as he came in.

"I feel so violated from that. God, it's likeâ€| ewww, like I was their little slave girl. I don't want that to happen again, ever" she told him.

"They can't do that if I'm around" he told her and thumbed her chin. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Interested in a late dinner? The DFAC is open all the time" she told him.

"Yeah, sure, though I warn you, I am absolutely exhausted, so someone might need to carry me" he told her chuckling.

"Don't expect me to do it, I'm in the same boat as you" she told him and sighed.

"Well I already knew that" he chuckled.

"I didn't mean it that way! Wow, bad joke hon." She gave him a small laugh.

"I know I know, couldn't resist, today has been pretty much all professional. I had to get it out of my system. Now, food? Or sleep?" he asked.

"Food first, sleep after" she responded. He nodded and they both got out of their dress uniforms, which Seth had already unbuttoned his top shirt and taken off his tie. Elena had done the same and was showing her white shirt below. They both got into some casual clothes, and Elena was actually allowed to bring on quite a few personal things for her quarters. She had both her group pictures on the nightstand, as well as the pictures with her family, and with Seth as they had gone to a baseball game and a museum. She had brought some of her models as well, and had a plaque on the wall that had her death inscribed into it. Seth was good for her, as Andy just did whatever she wanted, which was just hanging out. Seth opened her up to different things, actually wanted her to try to go out. She had never eaten Ethiopian before, and after she tried it, she loved it. She got interested in something, and he tried to push her to go do it, and he in exchange got to try something new as well.

Seth hadn't unpacked yet, and she offered to help later. His containers had his clothes, his gym sweats as well as his Muay Thai kickboxing equipment, mainly his grappling gloves and boxing gloves, as well as his ceremonial circlet and safety gear. He had two kinds of ankle covers, one with shin guards and one without, as well as a

padded vest and helmet. He had two different mouth guards and even a visor, but most of it he didn't use, it was simply there because of the training, and mostly for the person he was sparing with. He also had brought a container of mementos like a baseball signed by a legendary player for the San Francisco Giants, a very old Thai coin, a very old gold dollar coin, a picture of his parents, and a Buddha statue, as well as an incense burner. He wasn't allowed to burn incense, but it was the thought of it that he kept alive.

Due to his position, he kept a pistol in the quarters at all time, and was clearanced for it. It wasn't an M series either, as it was a CX7-T modified with extended clip and laser sight, and was far more adaptable than the M series, allowing multiple types of ammunition. The only drawback was if it didn't get enough maintenance, in which he was careful about, it had a chance to jam more than the M series.

They both walked out and dragged themselves to the DFAC and got a late dinner. Everyone else was asleep aside from the graveyard shift, so they pretty much had the large room to themselves and a few cooks in the back. Seth and Elena ate their food in relative quiet, not really having the energy to have a decent conversation. Afterwards, they cleaned their area and dumped their trays in the trashcan and left them on top, and then went back to her quarters, now their quarters to sleep. Everything was very peaceful between them as they had slowly settled down for the day.

"I'll give you a tour of the ship tomorrow if you want" Elena said as she cuddled up next to Seth in their bed.

"Only after we get that equipment connected, and frankly I already know from schematics I read when I came up. Hey, about you coming to the lab, if you want to visit, you have authorization now, so don't worry about coming in and saying hello ok? I'll more than likely do the same when I can with you, it's not like I'm going to stay away the entire time. Just don't ask a lot of questions involving equipment, and everything will be perfectly normal" he told her.

"No equipment questions, gotcha. Can I ask how you're doing?" she asked.

"Of course hon. Don't worry about that. Good night, sweet dreams" he told her and kissed her and then kissed her forehead.

"Good night" she repeated and turned off the lights. They both drifted off to sleep, knowing they were together now, both outside of their jobs and inside.

\*\*[0600 hours, March 30\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, UNSC Infinity class carrier \*\*\_\*\*Conundrum\*\*\_\*\*]\*\*

Elena woke up first and got out of bed to get her gym clothes on. Seth had his head under his pillow and the sheets around his waist. She noticed he slept on his stomach and with his arms crossed over his chest like he was in a coffin. She cocked an eyebrow and smirked. She had read one time about different sleeping positions telling the personality of the person, but she didn't know what the coffin position said about Seth.

She slipped next to him and lightly kissed his forehead and rubbed

his back. He was immediately awake, and clearly a light sleeper, as his eyes focused on her right off the bat, with no apparent grogginess as he realized he was awake. He didn't jump up from being woken up, just opened his eyes and focused on her quickly.

"Hey, sorry to wake you, just wondering if you wanted to go to the gym with me before you started your day" she said softly, trying not to be too loud as he just woke up.

"Yeah, sure thing. What time is it?" he asked.

"0600. I normally wake up at this time if I'm not on shore leave. You can sleep in if you want, I don't really mind" she told him while running her hand gently on his shoulder. He rolled over and blinked somewhat and sat up.

"Nope, nope, I'll get up, I could use a work out, just a heads up though, my work out is a bit different than your work out" he told her.

"Oh really? No dancing with your girl?" she asked coyly.

"Sadly, no. I need to get some punches in" he told her smirking.

"Punches? At me?" she asked confused.

"No! haha, not you, remember what I practice? I got to loosen up that way, gets my blood pumping better" he told her and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'd never do that, ever" he said softly and looked at her in the eye.

"Good, cause I was a bit worried there. I thought I did something wrong" she chuckled.

"You? You could never do anything wrong hon. Never" he told her and got out of bed and grabbed his boxing clothes. He stripped right in front of her and got them on, not caring if she saw him naked. They had already had sex, so them seeing each other in the nude didn't faze them in the slightest, except when they were being romantic. They enjoyed the little things, holding hands, cuddling, laying their heads on each other's laps, leaning against each other when sitting, though it didn't stop them from getting aggressive in bed.

He put his shoes on and then grabbed the container of boxing equipment he had. He put his grapple gloves on and his ankle socks on with shin guards, as he expected to be kicking at hard objects continuously in Makiwara techniques. He decided to put on his elbow pads and knee pads just for this, as he felt a tad bit rusty. He picked up a small canvas bag and threw the remainder into it, and then carried it out with Elena leading.

They arrived at the gym and Elena noticed Aldric there.

"Hey, glad to have a dance partner again" he told her smiling. Seth looked between them.

"Yeah, we danced a long time ago, I got him to do Salsa. Wanna do

some today?" she asked smirking. Aldric nodded.

"Unless Seth wants to dance with me" she asked and winked at him.

"It's ok, I'm not the jealous type. As long as it isn't something I should worry about it, I won't" he told her chuckling.

"You don't, trust me, Aldric is in a bit of a romance with someone in the squadron" Elena told him and looked at Aldric.

"I can't believe that is getting outâ€¦ Sarah is actually coming back out of her shell and I do not want everyone knowing about this. Please keep it a secret alright General?" Aldric asked.

"Aldric, you know me. It's safe. If it helps Sarah, by all means, I wish the both of you luck. You two are good together" she eyed him and winked.

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Well, shall we start our warm ups?" he asked. Elena nodded and Seth put down his bag. As Elena and Aldric pulled and stretched, both of them noticed Seth walk over to a stand with multiple boards attached. He sat down on his knees and looked like he was praying for a minute, his hands pressed together and his eyes closed.

"Hmm, very spiritual" Aldric commented.

"He practices Muay Thai and I think a few others from what he told me. I haven't seen him do anything yet, but it actually sounds very interesting" she replied.

"It is. I haven't had the chance to practice it, but most of the martial arts can make the average man actually go toe to toe against a Spartan these days" Aldric told her.

"Really? But you guys are so fast and strong" she told him.

"Speed and strength can be evened out by skill and technique, and just because I'm fast doesn't mean a normal human can't be just as fast, it's just unlikely. The enhancements we receive can occur naturally and with conditioning over time, it's just far easier to have the enhancements injected" he explained.

"Wow, I had no idea. I wonder if-" Elena said just as Seth got up and started striking the boards with his wrists and forearm, everything that wasn't padded.

"Wow, I had no idea your boyfriend does Makiwara. That'sâ€¦ very interesting" Aldric said watching. They were going to immediately start dancing, but they spent a good deal of time watching Seth train himself. He hadn't noticed, and he had expected them to just get on with the dance moves. He lunged at a board, and instead of attacking it, let it strike his chest. He backed off as they both saw his muscles flex.

"What's Makiwara?" Elena asked.

"It's a conditioning method used to harden the body to take hits many times worse than it's supposed to. It strengthens muscle and bone to

be almost as hard as iron, and is a decent replacement to the ceramic bone ossification, though not quite on par with it. Still, very impressive. He's actually interesting to watch. I had always wanted to learn Muay Thai but unfortunately we're simply trained in hand-to-hand standard. I'm hoping to take the classes actually" he told her.

"That's interesting, I might ask if he'll teach me a few moves" Elena chuckled. Seth suddenly kicked one board and nearly bent it. He backed up and grabbed the board and bent it back into shape, and then looked at the two suddenly staring at him.

"What?" he asked confused.

"Nothing, just interesting watching" she told him smiling.

"Aren't you two going to dance? Go go, I'm good" he told her, a little uncomfortable with having them watch him.

"Hey, I thought you wanted me to see you fight, now I'm watching you. Go on, don't worry about us hon, unless you're embarrassed?" she asked.

"I'm not embarrassed, it's just odd when I'm working out to have people watch. It's not a match or anything, nothing especially awesome" he told her.

"You're awesome to me no matter what you do Seth, don't ever forget that" she told him smiling and winked.

"Likewise. Go go, Aldric is it? Go do your stuff, you guys need to work out too, I might watch as well, it goes both ways" he chuckled. Aldric nodded and they both started their dancing as Seth moved to the boxing ring and did a few more stretches, rocking on his knees in a kneeling position and rolling around, then punching at the air and kicking. Elena and Aldric had finished one dance before they just stopped and watched him. He was fighting an invisible enemy, probably multiple enemies for all they knew. His moves were fluid and quick, with fast strikes and hard kicks.

Elena watched as each time he struck at the air, his muscles tensed quickly and fired off the energy required to propel the limb forward.

"His technique is impressive. It's very mesmerizing, just like a dance almost" Aldric commented. Seth stopped.

"It is sort of like a dance in a way. The only real difference is my partner is trying to slam me onto my back while you guys are working together to be nice to each other" Seth chuckled as he breathed a bit harder than he did before. Elena and Aldric were somewhat sweating, but Seth was slowly working it up, and fired off a quick snapkick to the air and even Elena and Aldric had a bit of difficulty tracking.

"You look great hon!" Elena cheered.

"I'm not fighting anyone yet love, that's when I get interesting, not tooting my own horn or anything" he told her.



"Well I still think so" she pouted jokingly and he leaned down and gave her a kiss. Buck walked in with Dutch and Mickey and started to do their work outs.

"Hey guys" Elena waved.

"Well hey there fly girl! Guess you're getting back into the swing of things huh? Again, good to have you back" Buck said.

"Yeah, it's awesome to see you here" Dutch commented.

"Where's Renee?" Elena asked.

"Lil Sarge is with the Master Chief still, guess they're sleeping in or something, maybe at the DFAC already, dunno. Hey, that your boyfriend?" Buck asked.

"Yup, Seth, this is Sergeant Edward Buck, Buck, this is Seth Franklin" she introduced them.

"Wait, THAT'S SETH?" All three of them asked in unison. They all gawked.

"Ah, yeah, hi guys" he chuckled.

"Fucking hell I thought you were aâ€¦| aâ€¦|" Buck tried to say.

"A poltergeist? You do know you can't talk about that right?" he smirked.

"Yeah yeah, I know, beyond classified, above top secret" he groaned and looked at the ceiling.

"Good, glad we understand each other. Yeah, it's me. I'm on board officially helping you guys in a few ways, but don't expect me to be there all the time, I'm a busy guy" he told them.

"Hey, with what you can do, we're happy with whatever support we get these days. We'll survive on the ground, we always do" Dutch replied.

"I know that, just saying, if you're expecting me to block a nuke dropping on you guys in the future, I may not be there, so uhâ€¦| wellâ€¦|" he trailed off.

"Stick our heads between our legs and kiss our asses goodbye?" Mickey chuckled.

"Pretty much, though it's doubtful it'll get that bad, I'm just saying, that's all" Seth chuckled.

"All good man, we're Hell Jumpers, we handle shit much worse" Dutch told him.

"I don't doubt it. Well, we'll let you get to your work outs" Seth said as Dutch and Mickey started lifting weights.

"Hey, looks like you do boxing, I used to be pretty good when I was younger" Buck told him.

"Uh, he's not really doing the normal boxing Eddy, I don't think you could keep up" Elena chuckled and looked up at Seth still in the ring.

"Oh come on, it's all the same right? I could do with a spar if you're interested, just some friendly fighting that's all" Buck said.

"No no, seriously, he really doesn't do normal boxing" Aldric told him.

"Boxing is boxing, no matter how you look at it" Dutch replied.

"Yeah, I mean, how much damage could he do if we wear padding?" Buck said. Elena and Aldric looked at each other. They saw the bent board, and that was from a kick that didn't look like it was his full strength.

"Uhâ€¦" Elena looked away from him.

"Come on, it isn't that bad. Seth, whaddya say?" he asked.

"Well, I guess, if you really want to, don't expect me to go down quick though" he responded.

"Don't expect to get an easy drop on me either" Buck chuckled. Mickey suddenly snuck to the terminal and called others to see the fight. Renee and John walked in, as did a few other marines and ODSs. Jones came in too.

"Oh fuck, why the hell did you do that?" Seth growled.

"Come on man, just some people to watch, nothing bad right? All in good fun" Buck said and went to shake his hand before putting his gloves on. Seth looked down at his hand and then at Buck.

"What, you wanna be rude?" he asked.

"No, justâ€¦ well, the way I fight, we don't shake hands. I'll show you after you get your gloves on. Trust me, it isn't rude, it's far more respectful" he told him.

"Ah ok" Buck said and got his gloves on and had Dutch cinch him up. Seth pulled off his shirt and Buck suddenly saw how toned he was. His chest was complete muscle, though he wasn't bulky or built. He turned around and kept his grappling gloves on.

"What, you aren't getting your gloves on?" Buck asked as everyone watched.

"I already have them on" he said and kicked up his legs from the knee up. He was stretching and walking like an ostrich, as he got into his corner. Buck got his padding on from Dutch, and put his mouth guard in. Seth got his in as Aldric got up into the ring and acted as referee. Everyone was cheering as Seth walked up to Buck and Aldric watched.

"The main way to show respect is this" he said and put his hands together and did a prayer towards Buck, and bowed. Buck watched him

and put his gloves together and bowed as well. Elena smiled. Seth wasn't the average fighter, he showed a completely different way of responding to a lot of things, something new and different. Even though he wasn't Asian, he brought some culture to the ship, if only in fighting and his religion. Seth smiled to Buck and did a knuckle bump to his gloves and then backed up as Buck walked forward. They pressed their gloves together and Aldric waited.

"Hey, where's your padding?" Buck asked through his mouth guard.

"I don't need it" he smiled.

\*\*[Music: Ben Gidsjoy " Ready, Set, Go]\*\*

"Fight" Aldric said and suddenly Seth had a kick fly out and knock Buck completely across the ring. He slid a good five feet.

"What the fuck?" Dutch and Mickey gawked.

"This isn't normal boxing Buck, as we tried to tell you" Aldric told him. Seth saw him get up and the next round started.

"He fucking kicks like a mule!" Buck mumbled out of his mouth guard. Seth sighed.

Buck got up and punched, and Seth grappled and threw him. The next round Buck threw some quick punches and Seth dodged and kicked hard against the chest armor, knocking him sideways and then kicking at his legs, sweeping him and landing him on his back.

"Oh ok, fine" Buck said and started doing his own kicks. Seth grappled his leg and pushed him hopping towards the rungs.

"Hey hey hey" Aldric tried to say.

"It's allowed in Muay Thai" Seth told him. Aldric backed off. Grappling was part of the kickboxing art. Seth kneed him in the side and Buck was actually feeling it through the padding. He tried punching Seth in his side and Seth was just ignoring it like it was nothing.

"Fuck he's tough!" Renee watched in amazement.

"He practices for that, his body is trained to take hits" Elena told her.

"Really? Shit" she replied as Seth knocked Buck's legs out from under him. Again and again, Seth had him on the ground, and the score was just racking up in Seth's favor. He seemed to barely be trying also.

"This isn't even a contest" Dutch commented. Buck finally put his gloves up in surrender motions and Seth helped him up.

"Nice work out, thanks" Seth said as he pulled out his mouth guard.

"Not much of a fight though" Buck replied.

"What?" Seth asked.

"For me anyways, you had me on the ropes from round one" Buck chuckled.

"Heh, you don't really fight like I do, that's all. I guess we should have been more specific on how I fight. I do Muay Thai kickboxing and a few others mixed in for balancing" he told him. Buck gawked.

"Fuck, no wonder I lost! Shit, you'd have better luck with a Spartan, though if I learned that, I guess it would be even right?" he asked.

"Yeah, probably. If you learned it, we'd have a better time, trust me. You'd probably win with the experience you have" he smiled. Buck nodded and knuckle bumped him after his gloves were un-cinched. Seth started to leave the ring but Aldric stopped him.

"Hey, interested in a quick fight? Kelly wants a go it looks" Aldric said.

"Who's Kelly? I don't normally fight women, but ok" he said. Kelly got up in the ring and stood there. Seth looked up at her.

"Ah, that's Kelly. I get the feeling I'm about to be knocked down a peg. I wasn't even on a peg to begin with guys, honestly. No ego here. I'm about to get my ass handed to me I'm guessing" he chuckled.

"Oh come on! You can take her!" Elena laughed.

"Um, well, depends on how quick she gets a hit in. Fuck, this is gonna hurt" Seth groaned. His body was conditioned for the strikes, but Spartans were a lot stronger than the average person. He'd have to be careful.

"I'd suggest putting on the padding" Kelly told him.

"Eh, let's try this out. Friendly fight?" he asked. She stared at him.

"I wouldn't be fighting you if it wasn't friendly" she smirked. Seth sighed, and figured he'd lose. Everyone was getting a show regardless, and it was all in fun.

\*\*[Music: Adelita's Way - Invincible]\*\*

Seth prayed towards Kelly and she just smirked and nodded. Seth was a little annoyed at that. She wasn't showing proper respect. Aldric lifted his hand and Kelly immediately lunged at him. She struck at his chest and he stumbled, but he was still in the fight. She smirked. Seth was annoyed, she was using ego to keep her stronger. He'd have to win now.

She threw quick punches and he dodged and went for her legs, but she jumped up to dodge and threw another punch; Seth knew exactly where she'd tried to connect. He had grappling gloves; she didn't. He grabbed her arm and threw it by him, and elbowed her in the head. Muay Thai wasn't just about fists and feet, he used a far wider array of hits to strike. She tried to block it but he had her already

heading forward and kneeling her in the gut. She grunted and backed up. She was a lot faster than anyone he'd fought before, and he had to make sure she didn't land another punch. The spot she hit smarted, and any other person would have probably had a broken rib.

"Not bad" she said through her mouth piece.

"Dido" he replied as he circled her, looking for an opening. She struck again and grabbed his arm, but he twisted and rolled with another punch, bringing himself closer in so she couldn't get enough force with her punches. She tried to elbow him like he did, and quicker, but he knew how the moves played out. He blocked and rolled with it and struck quickly at her chest, and made her grunt. He had struck her in her breasts. This was why he would much rather fight men versus women. He was striking an area that was specific to the female anatomy. Men he just hit pecks. It felt odd for him doing that, but he shoved it aside as she rammed her knee into his stomach. He grunted and backed off from his grapple with her, and she from him. She nearly knocked the wind from him, and he controlled his breathing carefully to get it back. The fight was doing well, and he was responding far better than anyone in the past had against a Spartan. John still remembered his fight with three ODSs that he had taken down. Seth was doing much better than they were, but he was good at getting out of grapples as it was his main fighting style.

They came at each other again and he punched quickly, and she caught his fist and tried to bring her elbow down on his. He grabbed her fist and slanted his own hand, and her gloves rolled with the move in a glancing blow. It still put stress on his tendons.

"Hey hey, no snapping of limbs here" Aldric told her. No matter how they looked at it, strikes against joints was wrong if it involved attempted dislocation. Seth backed off and looked at her oddly. He never went for joints, it was an illegal move.

"It would have disabled him" she told Aldric.

"Kelly. Look who you're fighting. This is supposed to be friendly remember? If you can't do that, then the fight is over" Aldric told her sternly. He looked over at Seth. His elbow joint hurt from the deflection he just did. If he didn't, he was sure she would have dislocated it from the impact. She wasn't fighting clean anymore, and that worried him. If he was an enemy, he'd have understood, but he wasn't, and that's why he was wondering just what her mind set was.

"Can you handle this or not?" Aldric asked. Kelly nodded. Seth walked back up, still sore. She threw another punch and he blocked, still pushed back from the impact and dodged left. She struck again and again, pushing him towards the rungs. He blocked as she attacked again and again and finally got a blow against him. His jaw flew right from the impact as he saw stars. He rolled left to get out of the pin move and kept his guard up, but he was having difficulty standing.

"Hey, hey, stop, he's done" Elena tried to yell through the cheering as Aldric watched carefully. He turned around and looked at her as she yelled for him to stop the match. Kelly came at Seth and struck at him, and he blocked but his arm was smashed against his side. He

was losing incredibly fast from her impacts. She kneed him and he heard a crack from one of his ribs. He backed off in pain and grabbed her next punch and threw her, seeing the move and kneeing her back. She grunted as he suddenly kicked as she rolled to try and get another hit. His kick, even with her weight, sent her flying from her low balance. She grabbed at his arm at the last second and pulled him with her, and Aldric started stepping towards them as she got him in a headlock after striking his left shoulder, hard.

"Hey! Stop! Right now! This isn't wrestling!" Aldric said but Kelly could barely hear him. She was in a trance almost to fight Seth, and he was desperately fighting for air. His face was going red as he struggled to get away. This wasn't a friendly fight anymore, she was trying to knock him out or worse.

"That's enough!" Aldric roared as Kelly suddenly came to realize what she was doing and immediately let go. Seth struggled for air and coughed, spitting out his mouth guard as Elena climbed into the ring as the cheering stopped and silence came over. Seth was having difficulty breathing. He was blinking rapidly trying to keep focus, and Elena slid next to him as a marine medic came up to check on him.

"Can you see my fingers?" the medic asked. Kelly was in astonishment at what she had done and didn't back off, and had him laying on her lap. She kept him completely still as she apologized.

"I swear, I didn'tâ€¦ I am so sorry sir, I justâ€¦" she trailed off as he coughed and held his throat and his side.

"You could have killed him!" Aldric told her. Kelly had worry completely washed over her face.

"Seth! Seth are you ok?" Elena asked worried as she held his head. He looked at her as he breathed, pain spiking from his rib.

"I think one of my ribs is broken" he told her hoarsely. Elena looked up at Kelly. She had again been too aggressive.

"This never should have happened, we should have stopped this before it even started" Aldric said.

"I swear, I am sorry. Let me get him to the medical bay" Kelly offered. She helped him slowly get up as he winced.

"I still won" he mumbled.

"Yeah, I agree, I was disqualified, you won" Kelly told him. He had won. She would have landed on her back from the hit, but she had to grab him and pull with an illegal move. She helped him through the door as Elena had his other arm over her shoulders. They walked him to the medical bay as Kelly heard something.

"What was that?" she asked as there was a very light beep come from his shoulder.

"Pacemaker and defibrillator. Oh fuck, they could be damaged" Seth winced. Now Elena was really worried.

"Shit, are you in danger ofâ€¦" she trailed off.

"No no, they just keep my heart from doing something if my arrhythmias start screwing with me. That last strike could have knocked them off kilter. God my shoulder feels like it's gonna explode" he winced. It looked like it was dislocated from Kelly's strike. Suddenly Seth groaned.

"What? What's happening?" Elena was really worried now.

"I really think they're off kilter now, I just got a shock to my heart. Get me there quick" he winced again. They moved him as fast as they could without causing further pain. They got him to the medical bay and laid him on a medical bed as the doctor came over.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked. Elena explained the situation and the doctor nodded.

"Call Dr. Montez immediately, and have him come here" Seth said.

"I can handle resetting the pacemaker" the doctor told him.

"No, not you. He will. This is an order. The pacemaker has special coding, and you can't screw with it" he told her.

"Seth, I'm a doctor, I can help you but only-" she stopped as he looked at her.

"I said, that's an order, per authorization code Delta Four Zero One Papa, he is my doctor and he is required to look at it" he told her. She sighed as Elena looked at him.

"Seth, just let her-" she tried to say.

"He needs to look at it, not anyone else do you understand me? Him! Not her! Get my drift?" he said slightly annoyed. She nodded and sighed, a little annoyed that he had snapped at her.

"You don't have to talk to me like that" she said softly.

"You guys aren't getting the idea! He's the only one who can look at it! Think carefully!" he said looking right into her eyes. He was expecting her to understand. Suddenly it hit her. She was being foolish. The pacemaker could be a special model that was classified material.

"Shit, I'm sorry, I forgot" she suddenly looked at the ceiling realizing it.

"It's ok, just get him and have him come here" he told her. She nodded and went to a terminal to call him. Dr. Montez came in after ten minutes as Seth got a few more shocks, and Jenny came in with a modified terminal with a small mouse like object attached to it. She laid it onto a nearby table and placed the object over his shoulder. He winced.

"Ah, dislocation. Yeah, we'll set it in a sec, just hang on while we check the systems" she said and looked at everyone.

"Privacy? Please?" she asked. Everyone left except for Elena, and as the doors closed Jenny closed all curtains, blocking all

visual.

"Tachi?" Jenny asked.

"All sensors blocked. Room is a dead zone" he responded over the coms. Jenny opened the terminal and checked on his heart connections. Elena looked over her shoulder and was amazed at the level of detail it provided. She knew she had a defibrillator in her own chest, but it was nothing like what she was seeing right now. Data flowed by on how much blood flow there was, oxygen levels, nutrient consistency, plaque buildup if any, node signal strength, muscle strength, valve control, everything about it was extremely detailed. She could even see a wire frame of what his heart looked like along with the spare pathway running along the side.

"Ok, let's just do this" Jenny said and tapped a few buttons with a stylus. Seth breathed somewhat in relief.

"No more shocks?" she asked.

"Nope, done" he said.

"That was probably painful" Elena said softly as she looked at him.

"It was more than painful Elena, it could have killed him. Enough shocks can produce an overproduction of adrenaline and screw with signals to the heart, potentially telling it to shut down. He could have died" she told her. Elena's eyes went wide.

"Ok, that's it, you are never fighting them again" Elena told him sternly, worry was etched in her eyes. He chuckled at her.

"I still won, she fought dirty, or this wouldn't have happened" he told her.

"Still, no more Spartan fighting, at all, you hear me? I don't want this to happen again" she growled at him, but she wasn't angry. She grabbed his hand and squeezed gently.

"I swear, no more Spartan fighting, unless they fight fair" he chuckled.

"That's not what I said! Period! No more! At all!" She yelled at him. He could see her being scared for him.

"Fine, I promise" he told her. She immediately had her pinkie wrapped around his.

"There, so you can't try and get out of this" she told him.

"Fuck you're fast at that. Fine, yeah, I won't" he told her.

"Alright, all done, they're both reset, no damage noticeable" Jenny said as Dr. Wright grabbed a small syringe.

"Oh no, no needles please" Seth looked at him.

"Come on Seth, you know you need this. You can take this as long as



you allow yourself to" Dr. Montez said. Seth sighed and nodded, then looked to his left as Dr. Montez pushed it into his ribs. Seth winced and then there was no pain coming from his rib.

"What was that?" Elena asked.

"We've brought a few things we've been working on in prototype phase. That was a mixture of calcium and minor heat bonding material as well as a mild anesthetic. There is also a base of nanites inside the calcium" Dr. Montez told her.

"So, they're rebuilding the break in his rib?" she asked.

"Exactly. He'll be fine by tomorrow. It's state of the art, with no need to wait until it fully heals beyond twenty four hours. It isn't standard however, and biofoam is still needed to contain any blood loss if there is a wound. That only fixes breaks, not loss of bone like if someone was shot. That would require an entirely different procedure to grow a new bone and place it in, and then allow a gel to be injected to regraft muscle tissue and ligament to the bone" he explained.

"Wow" Elena was in awe. GRID had some impressive toys at their command, and they weren't exactly sharing much of it. They couldn't, as most of it was extremely useful to the project, and was classified. She only knew about cloning organs.

"Alright, this time, I think we should call someone in" Dr. Montez said looking at his shoulder.

"I have an idea" Elena said.

"Who?" Jenny asked.

"Kelly, she did this, she can set it back in place" she told them. Jenny and Dr. Montez looked at each other. Jenny shrugged. She walked to the doors and called Kelly over and closed the terminal down. Kelly walked in and saluted.

"Ma'am" she said to Elena.

"At ease, this isn't a firing squad. Seth is gonna have you set his arm" Elena told her. Kelly nodded and walked to the other side of the bed. She grabbed his arm and looked at him.

"Sorry" she told him earnestly.

"I'd say no harm no foul, but that's complete bullshit. Just don't let it happen again. You gotta control that type of aggression. There is no place for that kind in the fighting ring. You are aggressive to win, but by the rules. If you cannot win by the rules, there was no reason to fight because you've already lost, you're just proving to everyone that you can't handle it. You didn't even show me respect by the prayer or glove bump" he told her. She nodded and picked up his arm. He winced as she suddenly pulled and he groaned from the pain, and then heard a pop. He sighed in relief as his shoulder was set back into place.

"Thanks" he said.

"Yeah. Ma'am, I apologize for my actions today. It was supposed to all be in fun. I didn't really want it to come to this. Please, I know I should expect punishment for those actions-" Kelly started to say.

"Punishment? Kelly, calm down. Look, I know you're sorry, and this was sparring all in fun but turned sour. You need to calm down and think clearly. You seem to have this idea that you're the fastest out there, and you are, but you don't need to prove your best at everything. He still won Kelly. He beat you, a normal human who has trained in this since he was sixteen" Elena explained.

"Actually I've been doing it since I was ten" he told them. Elena looked over at him with her eyebrows cocked.

"Seriously?" she asked.

"Longer than you've been dancing hon, yeah. I've done competitions before, though no one was as strong as a Spartan" he chuckled. Kelly took that as another reason to feel guilty. She could have killed him. His strikes were quick and powerful, but her body was built to take it. The only reason he won was that she wasn't allowed to do certain moves, however she also noticed he was restricting himself to simply Muay Thai in the fight. If he had gone all out and let her go all out, she actually figured he might be even with her. She really respected him for that. He wasn't a Spartan, but in close combat he could definitely fight like one. He just wasn't as strong.

"Anyways, you have to get that under control. I don't know how it is with you and the other Spartans, but seriously, you can't keep letting yourself go like that cause it's going to get someone killed. Did you really want Seth broken on the ground that much? Did you really want to win that badly to cheat?" Elena asked. Kelly was stunned. She really did cheat and she didn't realize it. On the battlefield, all bets were off, you did what you could to survive, but this had rules, to protect against things like this from happening, and she broke them.

Kelly looked at Seth with a look of hurt in her eyes. Jenny bandaged up his shoulder and injected a mixture of medi gel and anesthetics. She popped a pair of pills into his mouth and he swallowed them.

"Now don't use your shoulder for at least twenty four hours, at all. I'm sorry, but you are going to have to shower tomorrow, not today. You might be able to do a sponge bath, but that's it. No more being the sparring decoy for the Spartans ok?" Jenny told him.

"Hey hey, I won, everybody has been saying that, I won, fair and square" he said.

"Yeah, you did. I apologize for doing that Seth, I hope you can forgive me" Kelly said and stood up straight.

Seth looked up at her and sighed.

"Learn respect for those around you, that should be your punishment. I forgive you, but that is what you need to do. I can't help with that." Kelly nodded and thanked him. She saluted Elena and she saluted back. Kelly walked out of the room and out of the medical

bay.

"Great, now I'm gonna stink for the whole day" he grumbled.

"I think we can manage a sponge bath" Jenny chuckled and got some cloths ready.

"Staying or not staying for this?" Seth chuckled and winked at Elena.

"At you being washed like a baby? Eh, I think I can survive sitting and observing" she chuckled. He rolled his eyes and shook his head softly. Jenny cleaned him up carefully, and even took his shorts off and his crotch guard off, and cleaned around his thighs. Elena twitched slightly at the thought of another woman touching him, but he didn't seem to notice or respond in any way to her cleaning him, considering he couldn't move one of his shoulders and was still coming down from the stress and pain.

"Ok, all done" she told him. She was a registered nurse. She probably had to do it a few times for Seth in the past, or even others, maybe even women. It was part of the job.

Elena watched as Seth slowly got up from the bed as Jenny helped him up.

"Now, take it easy for at least the next six hours, go get something to eat, then relax. Dmitri can handle anything in the lab" Dr. Montez told him. He nodded as Elena quickly got to his side.

"Thanks Antonio" he replied.

"Good, now, we're probably going to get back to some shut eye after that rather interesting awakening" Dr. Montez chuckled. It was only 0800, and they were civilians. They didn't have to do anything unless Seth was in the middle of a mission or was hurt, and in this case, it was the latter.

"Remember to take your vitamins" Jenny told him.

"As long as I don't get slimed" he grumbled back. Elena was confused by what he said.

"Ah, no, you don't get that anymore, though it's still available. They finished it" Jenny smirked.

"You aren't fucking with me are you?" He asked. Elena was definitely confused now.

"Finished what?" she asked.

"Oh, there's this new chewable with a high nutrient content, looks kind of like an algae caramel chew, and tastes a bit like caramel with salted seaweed" he told her. She grimaced.

"It actually isn't bad, you can't really taste the seaweed flavor unless you really really try, and it provides a pretty decent vitamin boost. That, with an electrolyte drink and an energy bar can do quite a bit before I jump head first into a mission."

Elena looked at him.

"So, what, it tops you off?" she asked.

"Sort of. More like pushes me to the brim and keeps me there. My body is still slowly digesting it and producing energy compared to others in a cryo pod, though this stasis system is quite a bit different than anything you'd see on this ship. Think of it as adding an extra layer of energy temporarily to use. If I do anything to drop my energy, since I'm still working down the nutrients it just regenerates, slowly, but it does do it until it's all done."

Elena nodded slowly, but she still didn't get it.

"It's complicated. Let me worry about it" he chuckled and she helped him out and to the DFAC. He sat down while Elena got him food as the others stared at him.

"Yeah, I know, I got my ass kicked by a Spartan woman, you can all laugh now" he chuckled.

"You won man, you didn't get your ass kicked, she fought dirty to try and take you down and you still won" Mickey said.

"Yeah, you're ok in our book" Dutch told him and raised his carton of milk.

"Thanks" he said as Elena came over with two trays of food.

"Oh shit, Flag officer on deck!" she heard and everyone stood at attention.

"Shit, at ease guys, you all know me" she said.

"Gotta do what we gotta do ma'am" Mickey smiled.

"Down boys and girls, down" she chuckled.

"Same old same old. Pretty cool having a General as a friend, and one that won't go into the admiral's club each time" Buck said as he ate his eggs.

"Don't get too cocky, you said that same thing when you realized I was a Colonel, and I didn't exactly give any leeway then did I?" she asked as she ate some fruit.

"True, but we never asked you to do anything for us" Buck chuckled as he took a bite of his pancakes. Seth cut at his food carefully with his right hand and a knife as he gingerly held down the fork with his left. Elena noticed and looked at him.

"Need me to cut that for you?" she asked softly. He looked up at her thinking she was patronizing him, but he realized she was just worried he was having difficulty.

"No thanks, I got it, I've been through worse" he told her.

"You sure?" she asked rubbing his forearm gently.

"Yeah, it's cool, don't worry, I'm a survivor" he chuckled. She

nodded and ate her own food. Sarah and Aldric walked in with each other.

"Hey, there you guys are" Renee said.

"Hey" Aldric replied as Sarah just wave timidly. She was blushing as Aldric sat next to her after he got her a tray of food.

"Hey there Sarah, how are you doing?" Elena asked smiling.

"Good, thank you. It'sâ€¦ It's good to see you again Elena, I missed you a lot" she smiled back bashfully.

"Aww, well don't worry, I'm not going anywhere this time unless I retire, which isn't very likely anytime soon" Elena replied with a smile.

"Seriously, word got out on how you bitch slapped Colonel Falken. She's not asâ€¦ aggressive now as before" Buck told her.

"Bitch slapped? What are you talking about? I just chewed her out about a few things, nothing to be fed through the wrong channels. Don't go pushing around rumors where they don't belong and without properly clearing it. You can start problems Sergeant" Elena said professionally with her index finger pointed at him.

"Ack, sorry Elena, I mean ma'am" Buck said sheepishly as everybody laughed.

"She's not Dare bub, you gotta worry about what she says now" Dutch chuckled out.

"And you didn't worry about what I said when I was a Colonel, Corporal?" Elena asked amused.

"Wha? No, I mean yes, I meanâ€¦ sorry ma'am, we always listen to you ma'am!" Dutch said. Everyone was giggling.

"You're gonna let them simmer for a while aren't you?" Seth chuckled to her.

"And why not? I let you simmer one time" she chuckled.

"When have I simmered? I don't simmer, I apologize and then shut up. If you don't take my apology, then I can't do anything about it" he told her.

"Careful, she might order you to do something because of getting hurt" Renee chuckled.

"Alright, that's enough out of the peanut gallery. Besides, I can't order him around even if I wanted to" she replied.

"Why?" Buck asked.

"I'm a civilian agent remember? Plus, I kind of have a civilian rank that overshoots her" he told them.

"Huh, so, you're like a flag officer just higher than her? How high?" Dutch asked.

"I'm not telling unless I absolutely have to, and right now, I don't have to. I'm a civvie until otherwise noted" Seth told them.

"Fine, fine, no worries" Buck said in surrender.

Seth finished his food after Elena had a conversation with her friends, whom Seth didn't really know but they seemed alright. He was the last one to finish eating due to his injuries. Elena the entire time kept glancing at him. It wasn't wrong for her to watch out for her boyfriend.

"Hey, I'm gonna go check on the work in the lab, I'll see you guys later" Seth told them.

"Wait, hey! You're not supposed to do that, leave it to Dmitri" Elena told him.

"I'm not supposed to do physical work, doesn't mean I can't hold a data pad or type slowly. Just because I'm injured doesn't mean I don't have a job to do" he responded.

"Uh, yeah, it kind of does, at least that's how I've seen it" Dutch commented.

"You guys get to rest and relax when you take a bullet, but I don't exactly get that luxury in my line of work" he explained. Elena looked like she was pouting.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Seth asked her.

"You're going against the doctor's orders, and I don't like that" she grumbled at him. Seth smiled and tried to give her a kiss, but she turned away.

"Oh, I see how it is" he chuckled.

"Yeah, you see how it is alright. You go rest and recuperate" she pouted. Buck and Renee giggled at them.

"Fine, fine, I'll take some light reading to the observation room, how's that? I can still do some work while also resting, is that ok?" he asked. She turned and looked at him.

"I guess so" she said still giving him that "I'm worried about you" look.

"So, how long have you two been married?" Renee asked giggling. Both of them looked at her with their mouths agape and then turned and looked at each other.

"Ha ha, very funny. It's a little soon to be talking about that" Elena told her.

"But you've known him for how long? So, basically, it isn't that soon" John said.

"And how would you know?" Elena asked. John was about to speak, and then realized he really didn't know. He looked at Renee and blinked.

"Point taken" he responded.

"No no, he's got a point received. Surprised you haven't asked the question, I mean-" Buck started and then shut up as both of them looked at him.

"Don't give her any ideas please, I don't have a ring on this ship, and I doubt I can get a transport to go down below for just that" he told the Sergeant.

"Hey, we actually have one" Mickey told him.

"You do?" Both of them said in unison.

"Yeah, your old one. We found it in the scrapped cockpit, along with a nice necklace" he replied.

"You found my necklace! Orâ€¦ Andy'sâ€¦" Elena trailed off. Everyone was quiet.

"Well, yeah, we found them, the ring wasâ€¦ well, what a rock, seriously. Your ex went all out didn't he?" Renee said and then realized that might not have been the best thing to say. Seth looked down at the table thinking. Elena caught it quick and watched him as he stood up.

"It doesn't matter anymore though. I'll send it back to him later, both of them" she told them.

"You're sending them both back? Wow, uhâ€¦ that's, are you sure you don't want to keep them?" Buck asked.

"I'm sure" Elena said and looked at Seth. He shrugged. She was doing it to for multiple reasons, and one was to shed her connection to Andy beyond friendship now.

Seth started walking towards the door just as Elena got up. She jogged to him and held his hand.

"You have a duty to perform today hon, don't worry about me, I'll be fine, I'll just collect the data and work on transfer reports. Besides, I uhâ€¦ have a few books I want to finish" he told her. She leaned against his right arm.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes I'm sure. Hard to believe a Leo doesn't want to be fussed over right?" he asked.

"Wait, I didn't know you were a Leo" she said.

"Yeah, I'm not exactly one of those people who like the lime light. I'm sorry to say, I didn't really get wowed by the group waiting for me when I fought. I don't know, I'm just a big pussy cat. We love strong, and are very affectionate, and work to show that to our mates. We can also be incredibly head strong and egotistical, and we like to delegate and command rather than do the actual work, though it's supposed to work out in the end. Personally? I would like to see myself as affectionate, I don't know about head strong, the

egotistical is out the door because I'm constantly second guessing myself, and I'd much rather help with the work instead of sitting on my ass barking orders" Seth told her.

"I'm an Aquarius" she told him.

"Yeah, I know. We're supposed to be opposites, but opposites attract right? I've heard a few too many people say things involving relationships not working with certain zodiac signs. Aquarius is odd to most people. Did you know we don't make friends that easily? Are you kidding me? How many people did you see sitting there with us?" she smiled.

"I countedâ€¦ umâ€¦ no wait, no I didn't count, oops. I'd say at least eight? Sorry, wasn't keeping track at the time" he told her.

"See? I don't really follow that zodiac stuff, it changes too much from one person to another. Where you live and who brought you up changes things quite a bit for each person" she told him.

"I'd have to agree on that, but I'm still a pussy cat" he told her and wrapped his right arm around her waist.

"And the pussy cat needs some attention I'd guess?" she chuckled.

"All I'm asking for is a kiss, I'm not gonna push you against the wall and start making out with you" he grinned.

"Oh, shame, it'd give me something to do instead of going over reports and paperwork" she told him coyly. Seth looked away from her smiling. He was about to say something but she stopped him.

"No seriously, I need to do them, though that is really tempting, and besides, your arm" she tapped him on the lips with her index finger.

"I'd resist the pain for the pleasure and passion I'd receive" he told her.

"Rain check on that ok? We still go through slip space later, and that will give us two weeks until we travel to where we're going" she told him grinning.

"I can wait. It just stokes the fire that is the Leo's affection muwahahaha. Yeah, I know, bad laugh, I'll work on that" he told her and she laughed. She kissed him softly.

"I don't really see an ego there" she told him.

"Yeah, it died off a long time ago. I think I have it sitting on a bookshelf, all dried up like a prune. Doing what I do, I don't know, itâ€¦ well, gives you a different perspective on stuff. You're supposed to be the dreamer, but frankly, when you've seen what I have, you can't help but dream big about what else you'll see, and that you're a hell of a lot smaller than you might expect. It helps deflate the ego quickly when you notice all of your effort can't be told to outsiders much" he told her.



"Well, inflating it a bit, I thank you for all of your effort in the past that you cannot talk about" she told him and gave him a peck on the lips.

"It was a team effort, not just me. The thanks should go to the whole team in the lab, they've had my back the entire time, Dmitiri and his operatives, I mean, hell, the whole thing deserves thanks. I probably wouldn't be here without them. But thanks for the thanks nonetheless. You're more awesome than I am though, flying those fighters. I saw one of those video replays of you. Wow, that's all I have to say" he said smiling.

"Thanks" she whispered and leaned her forehead against his.

"You gotta do what you gotta do now, I know. You know where I'll be if you need a break" he told her and she giggled.

"Hey, why not just stay with me? We're both doing reports" she told him.

"Um, some of it isâ€¦ wellâ€¦ above your EBI level" he told her.

"Ah, well, I promise I won't look, you know you can trust me" she told him.

"I know, butâ€¦ alright. Just remember your clearance isn't nearly as high as mine" he told her smirking.

"How high is your clearance exactly? I have clearance for a lot more than you think I do" she told him with a cocked eyebrow.

"Yeah, you can see top secret, I know, but this isn't top secret. I'm Yankee-black, category one" he told her. She looked astonished. Yankee-black C1 was a clearance level that had evolved from previous clearances of the 20th and 21st century. It allowed all clearance of all shadow ops and hidden projects as well as anything to do with the military or something that could do undue harm to the UEG or civilian living.

"You have connections to theâ€¦" she trailed off.

"Yup, I've worked with the President of the UEG and the U.S. one of the books was actually given to me by the Secretary of Security's wife, and another is actually some odd game book from the President of the UEG. He's apparently some big Dungeons & Daggers fan" he told her. She just stood there in awe.

"What? It isn't as interesting as you think it is, just because I have the clearance doesn't mean I poke into everything I want. If I need it, I get it, if I don't, I don't touch it. The less I know, the easier I sleep at night" he told her.

"But what if something is some corrupt project that screws with something? Like the Spartan project was before?" she asked.

"Then there are either extreme circumstances that produced that project or there are groups of people that bring it to my attention to squash that corruption, or bring it by others to do that. Until it is told to me, why would I intentionally poke my head into every nook

and cranny I can and read stuff that probably wouldn't make much sense unless someone explains it to me? Remember, I live in a grey world Elena, some things aren't so easy to explain unless others can give a reason or can't. My main focus is insurrectionist quelling and intelligence gathering, and I do my job well. Now I help you guys where required, and still do my job. Until someone says otherwise above me, I will continue to do that" he explained.

"I guess you can't do anything unless it is brought to you to do it, otherwise you'd just be swinging around a sword for no reason" she said thinking.

"Exactly, and I might hit something with that sword I wasn't supposed to. This is why I try to be careful. Come on, let's change the subject. I'll stick with you today. I can't believe you don't have an office" he told her chuckling.

"I actually do, but I don't use it. Can't stand offices, I like the personal touch, calms people down when they meet me at my quarters, they don't expect problems and both of us think clearly" she explained.

"I guess I'm lucky I don't have an office, unless you consider my ice box that" he smirked. Elena giggled back.

"Come on, we got a day of paperwork ahead of us" she told him and walked him to their quarters.

"We can always make up for it with something fun later" he told her.

"Well, there's the entertainment room with a new assortment of movies and games, and the observation room has some more books, and then there's a revamped menu in the DFAC and the admiral's club" she told him.

"And then there's sex, and sex, and sex" oh, did I mention sex?" he said. She laughed.

"Oh really? Is that what's on your brain thinking about something to do with me? We can if you want but later" she giggled and winked at him.

"Eh, a good book sounds nice now that you tell me about it" he thought.

"Really? You'd take a book over sex with me?" she asked.

"Fuck no! I was just joking. Regardless, you said that can wait, and I'm a patient guy. I'm thinking" movie or game, or, one other thing that you didn't think about" he told her.

"It better not be sex again" she giggled.

"Nope. Conversation. You get a big crowd of people together and they all pitch in. It lasts like four hours minimum with drinks all around, it actually is pretty fun. Then of course you could always do the kid stuff together" he told her.

"Kid stuff?" she asked.

"Yeah, remember those games we used to play when we were younger? I know a few" he said and she looked at him curiously.

"Oh, huh, you know, as long as it doesn't interfere with the ship's personnel and duties, that actually sounds fun" she said thoughtfully.

"Exactly, and I'm hoping it doesn't. I'll explain it later, but it's a great game" he said to her.

"I actually can't wait" she responded and they entered their quarters and picked up their data pads and terminals. It was going to be a fairly boring day, until halfway Seth started reading his game book.

"To enter the cave, turn to page 242â€¦ what's gonna happen in 242â€¦ uh uh, not happening, no getting eaten, I'm going back. Fuck that, no dragons for this dumb assâ€¦ which page was that primitive cannonâ€¦" he suddenly said. Elena giggled. She was glad he was there instead of the observation room. He broke up her boring day with his wisecracks.

(Author's Note: Kind of long winded chapter with no actual going anywhere. Sorry, but it adds to their background. Seth is pseudo Buddhist, and a Leo, and Elena is an Aquarius. Opposites attract, and I feel that they mesh well together in the story, especially when he does completely out there things. Elena does out there things when she's flying, so two out theres equals REALLY out there, like, beyond the rim of the galaxy out there. Sorry Seth for the broken rib! Iâ€¦ fuck I thought I took away that bat last time, running now \*Seth charges at writer with Elena riding on his back\* "Growl! Hiss! Roar!")

## 12. Counting Bodies Like Sheep

\*\*[1922 hours, April 13\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Elena and Seth had spent most of their slip space time together. Despite what Seth and Elena had joked about, they spent little time actually being intimate and more time simply being close and doing things together, whether videogames or talking with her friends. Seth was a wealth of knowledge apparently, as he had provided information on countless things involving Earth's history, wars, different cultures as well as different animals and cultures none of them knew about. Remote viewing had allowed him to become a sort of spectral anthropologist for them.

Now that they had orders and had traveled to their destination, all of them were getting ready to go down. The colony was named Salvation, and despite the brutes attacking it, there was no sign of any Precursors. The fifth fleet was sent out to assist the Arbiter's personal fleet in defending the area. Both fleets combined were much smaller than the previous fleet Elena had been in, as the number was only fifty ships in total. Far fewer fighters would be about, though the amount was still large, as there were three wings per carrier and one wing per cruiser, and one squadron per frigate. Only three carriers were in the fleet, and there were fifteen frigates strewn

throughout to protect the larger ships. There were ten destroyers as well, eight cruisers and five new battleships off the line. Due to potential Precursor attacks, they were built to produce more up front damage towards capital ships, and therefore did not have fighter bays. They only had two hangar bays for pelicans at most.

This time, however, there were nine prowlers joining them for mine support and intelligence gathering. Two of them were not ONI, though they didn't let on that they weren't. One of the battleships was also not UNSC, and it was in fact Heavy 2-2 coming along. GRID ships did not have names, they never cared about them as there was no point in naming them. They were there for a reason, and that was to take out a capital ship or other assigned role. Heavy 2-2 was also the only capital ship to have active camouflage installed, as it was a stealth design. Most of its weapons were forward or spinal mounted, but when it did get a lock and all fired, it was certain that it could most likely take down a Precursor destroyer's shields by itself in one volley. Finishing it off however, was a different story.

Elena stood on the bridge waiting for all the pilots on the ship to get prepped and head to the briefing room. They didn't have much intel on the colony just yet, and that was where Seth was going to be coming in on. Dmitri walked towards the two women as they stood there. Colonel Falken was standing stiff as a rail behind them, as was Aldric and Jones.

"Alright, let's hope your boyfriend can pull through with the intel, the prowlers are working pretty hard on just getting buoys out there for advanced warnings" Dare told Elena.

"I actually haven't seen what Seth can do yet, so, don't know" Elena told her.

"Well I sure as hell know what he's capable of so far, and that's impressive in its own right" Dare told her. Elena wasn't around to see what he did before they had rescued her, so she had no idea just what Seth did with his mind.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, shouldn't we allow the prowlers and satellites to be set up to provide the intel rather than relying on an untested intel gather?" Colonel Falken said.

"Untested?" Elena looked at her.

"As I said ma'am, I mean no disrespect, but this just showing up seems rather odd. This is an unknown we've never worked with in the past, and given what we have available at the moment, it would more than likely be more prudent to allow the prowlers and fighters to run patrols through the area" Falken explained. She did not want to get on Elena's bad side again, and was doing everything she could to not do it. There were times during slip space that she would get angry with the way the squadron would relax and settle down while she wanted them to run simulations. Elena belayed her orders and allowed them to be comfortable. Falken had gritted her teeth and bared with the humiliation of having her orders countermanded by her superior. Elena knew Jiralhanae fighters were easy prey to Black Blade Mk IIs. The only problem that she had was that there were only six of the fighters on the ship. Another Black Blade was being manufactured for Elena, but it would take some time to transport it to them. They

couldn't wait, so until it was complete, she was fighterless.

She was a General, however, and was needed to stay on board the ship to control the flights. She realized without dog fighting that she had more control over the icons on the battle maps that she could provide vocal assistance to pilots under attack to better react to situations or order them to assist others. She didn't like being grounded, but she understood what was needed, and she was considered highly valuable being the rank she was. While they were in hostile space, she was being escorted by two ODSs at all times during missions. Where she went, they went, excluding the restroom or her quarters. She had entered her office once upon Seth's request, and quickly left after sitting down in the cushy leather chair. Despite the fact the place was comfortable with a couch and a nice rosewood desk and matching bookshelves, it felt wrong to her. She left quickly after.

"As you are trying to show some respect in this, I must intercede. You know nothing about what he is capable of, and therefore should simply keep your mouth shut until properly notified" Dmitri told her smiling. Falken rocked her jaw a bit, clearly annoyed.

"Fine, let's see what he is capable of" she said calmly, but with an icy look in her eyes.

"Seth, are you ready?" Dmitri asked as Dare and Elena looked at him.

"\_I'm here" he responded immediately after.\_

"Whoa" Elena looked around smiling. She heard Seth's voice come from seemingly nowhere.

"How did heâ€¦" Falken trailed off.

"Don't ask questions, just accept that it happened. Seth, everything is ready correct?" Dmitri asked.

"\_Copy. Need me to do the scouting?" he said.\_

"Would you please? That would be most useful" Dmitri said smiling to each woman. Elena was still wrapping her head around the fact that Seth was in a pod and yet talking to her without the intercom. She liked hearing his voice, but it was odd that it felt so close to her. It was like he actually was staring right at her, and not like an AI with sensors.

"\_Heading out. Watch the screens. You said you want full scouting or partial?" Seth asked.\_

"Battle data if you wouldn't mind, anything with tactical viability" Dmitri told him. Falken scoffed.

"Do you have a problem with this Colonel?" Dmitri asked.

"I'm sorry, but I do have an opinion of this, and nothing is changing that. I don't believe in magical abilities to see from nowhere" she said. Dmitri simply smiled and looked at Elena. Elena was slightly annoyed that she disapproved of her boyfriend's job, though she still hadn't seen anything yet.

"That opinion is about to change. Seth?" Dmitri said.

\*\*[Music: Hans Zimmer "Nano / Catalyst, Crysis 2: Be Fast!  
(Original Videogame Soundtrack)\*\*

Seth shot out quicker than ever, and they could literally see what he saw on the view screen. He was on the planet faster than they had ever expected, gathering data from different positions as Tachi translated it.

"How the hell!" Falken whispered as they watched in awe at how well he gathered intel. He was a master, and he saw the enemy brute columns without being seen, flitting around quickly and marking them. He tagged their weapons, vehicles, spare equipment, communications, everything.

"Whoa! ma'am, we have locks on! um, that whole army" one officer said from sensors.

"He's moving back" Dmitri said as Seth's view shot out from the planet and watched the whole solar system, tracking the orbits of planets and checking fleet formation as well as checking brute fleet formation.

"Holy shit!" Elena whispered.

"Impressive isn't it? This is what he does" Dmitri told her. She watched the view screens with utter astonishment. Seth was an invisible incredibly fast eyeball, the ultimate intel gatherer. If he saw it, he marked it, and then moved to another target almost instantly. Military intelligence had nothing on the GRID remote viewer. He was in a league of his own, just like Elena was in fighter piloting.

"\_Well well, guess what Dmitri? We have a match down there" Seth suddenly said.\_

"You can't be well, that's interesting. Ladies, I apologize, but we need to do some wet work while the mission happens. If you would please" he said and motioned for them to move with him to Dare's office. The two women walked in and sealed the door, excluding Falken.

"You don't have clearance for this Colonel, you need to stay out here" Dmitri smiled. She scowled and stood there as the door closed.

"Tachi?" Dmitri said.

"Sealed and blocked, you're clear" Tachi said over the coms.

"What's this wet work?" Elena asked.

"This is another part of Seth's and my job. The match is an insurrectionist leader, a biochemical specialist by the name of Alexander Garand. He's well known for the damage he has caused" Dmitri said as he turned on two viewscreens in Dare's office.

"Now, what I am about to show you two, it doesn't leave this room

understood? Captain Dare, you are held under the secret information act placed by the UEG" Dmitri said.

"I understand, under penalty of being acknowledged as a traitor, I admit this information to no one, not even ONI officials. The only ones who can ask me information are the same agency who provided the information, or the President of the UEG or Secretary of Security" Dare said.

"Good, you understand. Elena, you have clearance provided for you due to sanctioning by Seth, so it's a little different for you, but still, you cannot tell about this, do you understand?" he asked.

"I understand" she said, but was worried what she had just gotten into. This was Black Ops, off the reports stuff they were about to do. Dmitri pulled up the file involving Alexander on the screens. Elena and Dare read and saw the pictures of the bombs he created, the poisons he produced and the people he had killed. Elena was shocked by the things she saw. This man was a monster, killing innocent people. He wasn't fighting for freedom; he was killing for the sake of killing. The insurrectionists were just using him for their goals.

"My god!" Elena gasped.

"I know, the photos are disturbing. This is why we are stopping him" Dmitri explained.

"Alright, what's going to happen? Do we do anything?" Elena asked.

"No, just watch" he explained and turned around.

"Seth, ready?" he asked.

"\_Called Aaron on this one, as this is his file officially; going in" Seth told them.\_

\*\*[Music: A Perfect Circle - Counting Bodies Like Sheep to the Rhythm of the War Drums]\*\*

Seth's view showed up on the screens. It was incredible what he could show them from his ocular implants. He zipped underground through rock and straight to a base he found, hidden under it. They would have never known about it if they moved on top of it.

Seth moved through different corridors, completely unnoticeable as he floated around and saw a guard. He quickly moved to him and snapped his neck effortlessly. He dropped to the ground from the effect of breaking the bones with the psychic effects. Aaron killed the generators and the lights died, but Seth could easily see.

"\_We're heeeeerrrrreee!" Seth whispered in a creepy voice.\_

"\_Oli Oli oxen free, all in the free" Aaron said after.\_

Men moved around with flashlights, but Seth moved one of their rifles and pressed down the trigger, spraying it at all of them.

"We can't see anything!" "Hostiles not found!" "What the fuck is

going on?" "Oh god oh god oh god!" "They don't use doors! They're coming through the walls! Oh shit!" they heard as they moved through the corridors, killing the guards effortlessly as they couldn't fight back.

"\_Death. Save us, deliver us from evil" Seth and Aaron both said inside the corridors in very freaky voices.\_

They heard the scared breathing of some as Seth and Aaron came up to them, slamming them into others with concentrated psi blasts. Elena just watched. Seth was massacring them with no apparent emotion. They were rebels, trying to fight the UEG and cause unrest. They had killed countless people that didn't deserve to die. She was angry, and hoped Seth didn't show mercy.

They located the biochemist, Alexander, in a room guarded by four men. They were sweeping the area looking for anything with night vision goggles.

"Do keep him alive for this please, kill the rest Seth, we'd like to interrogate him later" Dmitri smiled.

"\_Fine" Seth replied and Elena heard everything.\_

The cries from the rebel soldiers as one was ripped in half by Seth's abilities as he caused two different points of gravitational pull below and above, and Aaron burned another alive with a pyrokinetic effect. Another was slammed against the walls continuously as Seth bounced him around like a pinball. The fourth just ran as fast as he could, not even caring about what he was guarding.

"Hey! Don't leave me here!" Alexander screamed in horror as the backup lights showed the guard run rightâ€ and suddenly be dragged across the floor screaming left past the door. The sounds of some buzzsaw going on and the guard screaming for his life and the sound of organs moving literally made Alexander back into a corner and start mumbling prayers.

Elena was astonished at what Seth was doing. He was utterly vicious and nightmare inducing towards the rebels. She turned away. He acted completely different from when he did his job to her and friends. He was very soft and kind, and always tried to help. But now, he was shredding people's bodies, maiming them, killing them in grotesque ways. She understood why though. He was waging psychological warfare.

Even Dare looked away from Aaron's view as he pulled the guard away and cut him to pieces. Alexander sat in a fetal position in the corner, holding his knees to his chest.

"Any other survivors?" Dmitri asked.

"\_Would it matter? We only need him right?" Seth asked.\_

"Yes, but it could help if we showed a bit of mercy. Anyâ€ younger innies?" Dmitri asked. Seth zipped around the rest of the base. Some had fled the base entirely, taking warthogs or just running. None ran towards the hidden hangar. That was back towards the killing and bodies.



"\_Found two" Aaron said as his view zipped to them.\_

Elena was amazed that they could see not just Seth's vision, but Aaron's as well. They were both broadcasting the information to the screens, even though Aaron was countless light years away.

"Get them locked somewhere and take all weapons away. Once the battle is complete, we can send a wet team to gather them" Dmitri said.

"\_Deal. Hope they like enclosed spaces, cause the closet is going to be cramped for a bit" Aaron said as he threw them back into the base and slammed them into a closet, and then pushed a desk down the hall and in front of the door.\_

Seth had grabbed Alexander and dragged him through the hallways as he screamed and fought to break away from whatever force had a hold of him.

"Deliver me from evil lord! Oh god! Don't let them get me!" he screamed.

"\_God has no favor for you murderer" Seth growled at him.\_

Alexander looked around in horror. He was dragged over one body and through the guts of another, coating his clothes in the entrails. He sobbed as he was thrown into another room and had it locked, and then a pile of equipment placed in front of the door.

"Wonderful work Seth, Aaron. Mission is mostly complete" Dmitri told them.

"I had no ideaâ€¦|" Elena said quietly as she watched.

"Seth is capable of many things General, as you have just seen. And they learn new things almost every day. This was psychological warfare. Notice there are others who have fled. They'll more than likely willingly give themselves up if we find them down below, any way to get away from the nightmare that has just happened in there" Dmitri explained. Elena had no idea that Seth could be able to act so cruelly to those men, but she realized he was in fact doing his job and stopping a mass murderer. Scare tactics were needed, and he had never shown that level of violence or anger to anyone he cared about. She remembered Jennifer had at one time clocked him one for some problem or another, she didn't know the full details, and he simply stood there and looked at her. Not once did he retaliate as she glared at him and then walked away.

"I hope that won't cause any undo psychological effects for you two ladies. It was simply them doing their jobs. They aren't as vicious normally when finding them, as this was a special case" Dmitri explained to them. Elena let out held breath. He wasn't normally like that, but she now knew there was another side of him she had never known about, a very dark side. He would never let it be visible to normal people, but against those who opposed the UEG, he was definitely a force to be reckoned with, an intangible demon. A poltergeist.

The viewscreens shut off and Elena and Dare looked at each other.

"Whoa" Elena said simply.

"No kidding right? As much as that was gruesome, I have a whole new respect for your boyfriend" Dare told her. Elena agreed. Seth's world was completely different. Seth probably could somewhat share in her world of flying as his view moved similar, but she doubted she could ever understand what he could do or see. He could only show her sometimes if there was a viewscreen.

"\_Aaron is heading back, something happening on the inner colonies. I'm heading to assist him since he had my back" Seth told them.\_

"Understood" Dmitri said. Dmitri wasn't in charge of Seth, he was simply the witness and observer that comprised reports and relayed information to non-GRID personnel, specifically Elena and Dare. He was definitely combat capable though, as he was Spetsnaz trained.

"So, Seth isn't here right now?" Dare asked.

"\_I'm still listening, I'm just working" Seth responded.\_

Dare looked up as did Elena.

"He has a tag on Elena I believe, to come back to quickly. He's capable of using tags on people to hear them speak, know their vitals, and jump back to them quickly if the need arises" Dmitri told them smiling. Elena now definitely knew he wasn't as vicious all the time in the pod, as even now he was keeping an eye out for her. There was some sort of guardian watching out for her right now, and he loved her. While he couldn't probably stop everything, he could make a difference somehow against an enemy fighter attacking her or one of her squadrons.

Elena and Dare unlocked the door and walked out to find Falken and the two commanders standing there at the front of the bridge, and they all looked towards the door suddenly.

"All done" Dmitri smiled towards them. Low and behold they'd never find out what Seth was capable of if pushed.

"Alright, we have the data" Dare told them and looked at Elena. She nodded back and walked out of the bridge with the two ODSs following her as did Aldric, Jones, and Falken. They walked to the briefing atrium as all the pilots were there.

All the pilots stood up and saluted and Elena saluted back.

"Alright, please be seated" Elena told them. They all sat down with their data pads in their chairs and watched her.

"Now, the information we have just received is brand new, and state of the art. Here is the brute fleet" she explained as she pointed to a very detailed wire frame of the enemy fleet, down to fighter formations, hangar positions, everything, even shield frequencies. Seth was very detailed. He really was a game changer. The shield frequencies would allow their weapons to ignore the shields and just

go straight to armor. MAC guns would just punch through capital ships like they were nothing.

"The battleship column will engage from this angle, and half of you will back them up. The other half will engage ground forces alongside the pelican dropships and albatrosses. Once the fleet has been dealt with, the other half will continue down and assist" she explained as she pointed to different squadrons and wings, and directed them to where they would be attacking and what ships they were connected to. The whole thing looked far smoother than normal with the information Seth provided. They had an incredible advantage with him being there. He was just not watching them for the time being as he was assisting Aaron.

Elena continued to explain the mission and where they would be going, and answered questions along the way.

"This is a rocky world everyone, with large mountain ranges all over. It's very easy to lose sight of bandits, so watch your six. If you happen to detect anything odd on the ground, report it immediately and mark the location. We already found an insurrectionist base, so there might be others hidden" Elena told them.

"Ma'am, an innie base on an elite colony? Wouldn't they notice?" a pilot asked.

"Not if they kept it well hidden. Don't concern yourself with that, it's being handled appropriately. Just do your jobs and fly. The rest will be handled by the spooks" she told them. She actually felt a pang of guilt for calling Seth that. She always thought the ONI operatives were creepy when they were around, but Seth was very open with her and extremely kind. Her friends actually gravitated to him while they were in slip space, and he had a good sense of humor. He even befriended Linda, as one morning Aldric and she had walked into the gym to find them both meditating together. He drank tea with her, and did small prayers when she showed up. She did the same in turn to him. It was surprising to everyone, as Linda was very quiet and reserved.

She dismissed them and they got up and walked out, but her personal squadron stayed.

"Ma'am, um, I know that you don't have a fighter right now" Jacobs said in front of her.

"Don't worry about it, I'm a General remember? I need to stay here anyways and coordinate the task forces with fighter TAC reactionary measures" Elena replied.

"Well, I would be willing to offer my fighter up if you wanted to stretch your wings ma'am" he told her. Elena cocked her neck a bit and smiled.

"Well thank you Jacobs, but I'll be fine. Don't worry about me, I'll get out there eventually" she told him. He nodded and saluted. Her whole squadron saluted.

"It'd be an honor to have you back out there with us when the time comes" Jacobs said and finished his salute. Elena smiled.

"Dismissed Lieutenant, go get your preflight done" she chuckled. He smiled and nodded, and then the whole team walked out. Elena felt odd not going out with her squadron this time, and really wanted to go to a fighter and just head out, but she couldn't. Not right now anyways. She walked out and to the bridge again, and stood there with Dare as Falken and the others headed out.

"Raven Squadron burning out" one officer said.

"How you holding up?" Dare asked.

"I'll survive, until another Black Blade comes over" she said as a small smile crept onto her lips.

"Obviously. The Steadfast and the Northern Wind are heading in. Alright people! Get ready! Follow the Infinity as it moves and keep on its tail! We're second in line with it as our swarm heads out!" Dare barked orders as she looked around. Officers gave orders on the bridge as they told forces where to go and communicated with other ships. Elena walked over to the flight control officer and leaned over her shoulder. Her name was Dariah.

"Hey, don't mind me, just keeping an eye on my pilots" she whispered. Dariah nodded but was a bit stressed with having a General peer over her shoulder.

"Alright guys, tighten up formation!" Falken ordered.

"Kind of sucks Elena can't come out with us to play" Jones said over the coms.

"Seriously? She isn't out there? Damn" one pilot said.

"No kidding right? The legend is stuck on board without a pair of wings. That's bullshit, they could have at least sent a spare Sabre with us or something" another pilot remarked.

"Hey guys, focus, track point in one minute" Jones commanded.

"Shields charged, weapons warmed" one pilot said.

"Viper 2-2 ready to rock" "Viper 3-3 ready" "Falcon 2-1 ready" "Falcon 3-1 ready" sound offs were coming from all fighters from the Conundrum. Elena listened to the whole thing as she watched from viewscreens and tracked their beacons over Dariah's shoulder.

"We have contact!" Jones reported. They had multiple pings happen in the distance as Grendels and Seraphs came at them, followed by boarding craft and behind that a fleet cluster of 100 ships. They were outnumbered two to one, but the Sangheili ships and human ships were now almost equal in matching combat strength, and were superior in tactics.

"Weapons free!" Aldric ordered.

\*\*[Music: Immediate "Shield of Faith"]\*\*

"Engage! Engage!" Falken ordered as they broke into pairs, Sarah and Aldric together as Merricks and Jacobs paired off and Roberts

followed her. Jones shot out with another Sabre on his tail and wiped the floor with two boarding craft quickly before gaining return fire. Aldric let Sarah pull enemies in a straight line as she dropped mines, blowing multiple fighters to hell by herself. Despite the fact she was still skittish, she was good at running, and her fighter complemented now. Twin auto turrets were now replacing her particle cannons on the rear that helped guard her from return fire, and were also pintle mounted to swivel and assist in the front. Aldric actually liked flying wingman for her because of what she did. Merricks liked Jacobs as Jacobs threw down well with multiple fighters, allowing him to get a decent shot with long range weapons.

Roberts went along with any plan that looked successful as Falken engaged two fighters, and as she fired a missile at one, Roberts fired at the other, to keep return fire to a minimum. Falken was definitely wrong at how poorly they piloted. They worked almost in unison with each other.

"Boarding craft incoming" a pilot said as the autocannons outside the ship and point defense lasers opened up on them, tearing through them quickly. Two got by, but the boarders soon realized there were still shields that they were bouncing off. They were target practice effectively. Brutes weren't being very smart now. The fleet entered range of the brute fleet and they started trading rounds between each other. The dog fights started moving around the ships as Jones followed two Grendels as they fired behind them, and a Sabre following Jones was hit. The shields flared as it dodged behind him to recharge, as they both played it safe and returned fire with their cannons.

Sarah zipped out with a mine drop at that moment and one of the Grendels hit it, blowing into pieces as it careened with the other, and Aldric followed her as two Seraphs tried to intercept her. Elena was very happy with how she handled things. She wasn't afraid anymore, but she did play it safe. She constantly stayed by Elena's side a good deal of the time that they were in slip space when not with Aldric, and even warmed up to Seth as he made her laugh often. Sarah had her big sister back.

"Viper 3-1, scissor right and engage that Seraph, cover Falcon 2-2" Elena said over the coms. She was watching keenly, and provided assistance with orders over the coms.

"Copy, heading to assist" viper 3-1 acknowledged and flipped, then headed after a Seraph that was attacking Falcon 2-2. The Seraph was quickly dealt with as both continued on, engaging other fighters. The casualties were extremely low, as compared to previous engagements they had only lost three fighters compared to the enemy's 50. There were more coming, but that still didn't prove how well trained their pilots were compared to the Sangheili Seraphs and human fighters.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a fighter squadron came flying out of the \_Infinity\_, looking somewhat similar to Black Blade Mk IIs.

"What the hellâ€¦" Elena whispered.

"I was about to say the same thing General" Aldric said over the coms as he watched them.

"This is Jacobs, running low on missiles, heading back to rearm" Jacobs reported.

"Merricks coming back with him" Merricks also reported.

"Rest your wings Ravens, the Eagles are taking to the skies" an unknown female pilot said.

"Who the fuckâ€|" Jones whispered. He wasn't even in a Black Blade Mk II, but he didn't like the idea that ONI had another project running for the Navy to produce a similar fighter to it. He knew they needed to constantly keep their equipment updated, but having another squadron come out of nowhere was odd. Six of the new fighters came out, looking like slanted wing versions of the Black Blade without the canard wings, and two more fin stabilizers on the bottom of the craft. They were also white, and not black, with a bit more angling in armor design and not sleek like the Black Blades. They shot out and attacked as they broke formation and continued to fight.

"That's new" Dariah whispered.

"It's only natural to have another project going" Elena replied and sighed.

"But are they the same?" Dr. Wright suddenly said behind her. Elena looked at him as he walked to her.

"Is your boyfriend still off doing what he needs to?" Wright asked her.

"I think so. Seth?" Elena asked to the air. No response happened for a few seconds.

"\_Little busy here, what's up?" Seth replied.\_

"Sorry hon, just wondering, you have any data on the pilots in this new Eagle squadron?" Elena asked.

"I think I can help with that, as well as Cortana" Tachi said as both he and Cortana popped up on a holo dais.

"Thank you. I hacked their communications and transferred all relevant data on the squadron. Tachi has been nice enough to decrypt it for me while I did so" Cortana said smiling.

"Always willing to help a fair damsel in need of assistance" Tachi smiled.

"Oh please" Cortana scoffed and smirked at him.

"Well, actually I was bored and so was she, it gave us something to do" Tachi replied. Cortana nodded.

"\_Good, heading back" Seth said and then there was nothing.\_

"Ma'am, those are Spartan 4s piloting them" Cortana explained. Elena cocked her eyebrow.

"More?" Elena asked.

"The process is done on soldiers now ma'am, it's viable" Cortana explained through the com mic on Elena's ear. That meant they didn't use kids anymore for the project, but trained soldiers that volunteered for the augmentations.

Eagle squadron slipped into the dog fighting and continued as Raven squadron retreated to rearm. Falken growled.

"Ma'am, I think I agree with you on that" Aldric told her.

"Good, because I damn well don't agree with them showing us up" she replied.

"Aldric, don't you know those guys?" Jacobs asked.

"No, I don't. Must be a second class" he replied. Elena watched as the Eagle squadron took out multiple fighters with ease, but the pilots looked reckless. They relied too much on their shields and improved armor.

"They're gonna get themselves killed if they keep doing that" Elena whispered.

"I agree, they use brute force it looks like" Dare said nearby. The battleships were now in range and they fired upon the brute ships. Four of their cruisers were dropped almost immediately from the new weapons.

"Hell yeah! How do you like that you sons of bitches!" Jacobs cheered as did multiple pilots as the battleships came to the foreground. Even the Sangheili were impressed with the power the human capital ships had.

"Alright, doors open, dropping pelicans" an officer said as pelicans left the carriers and support ships and headed towards the planet. The fight was still underway, but the pelicans were being escorted by other fighters and gunships.

Renee and John both sat in the same pelican as they felt themselves go through the atmosphere. Milo sat nearby with a rocket launcher issued and an SMG strapped to his leg, as well as a target designator. They reached the ground and opened the RORO, and everyone piled out to a not so hectic battlefield as they had landed much further away from a city. They all took up defensive positions around the pelican as they dropped a HAMMER drone on the ground and a warthog. The warthog was not for the reconnaissance or movement, but to provide extra firepower with the .50 caliber on the back. Two marines jumped into it along with a grenadier in the passenger seat, and they headed forward to the edge of the city.

There, they waited carefully as armored columns readied along the edge. The place was already being attacked by brutes, and it was urban warfare.

"Shit, I thought we tried to avoid this stuff like the plague" Milo grumbled.

"We do what we have to do Corporal" John replied.

Renee's section of troops was comprised of thirteen marines, with two being heavy support, one combat medic, Milo being artillery observer and two marksmen. The rest were riflemen carrying MA5Ds, the newer rifle. They each now carried forty rounds per clip, and did a bit more damage per round due to improvements in spring design, as well as being a bit more accurate. The down side was they took a bit longer to reload due to the small entrance for the clips as well as the HUD attachments for the top of the rifles was easy to jam, as any ECM system or radar jammer tended to screw up ammo count. The attachments were also not compatible with previous designs, as compared to the MA5C and B models which could swap anything. The advantage they did have was that they accepted grenade launchers under slung as the lights were now placed on the side along with a laser sight as standard to the barrel. Renee had one such equipped.

The section was laying low on the ground and waiting for signals to move towards the city.

"I just got word, Victor company is ready" Milo said through his coms. He wasn't just an artillery observer, he was tracking communications as well.

"Ok, we ready?" Renee asked as John kneeled in the dark. Everyone nodded as two Scorpions headed down the road towards the city as just behind them four Cobras locked down and transformed into artillery mode. Their 80 megajoule cannons popped out and immediately fired upon the city.

"Flares are out! Go go go!" Renee yelled as they ran towards the city, mortar rounds flying at them as multiple other groups ran towards it as well. There wasn't a wall around it, and as they reached the outskirts they slammed against buildings as spikes shot towards them. A mortar blew up nearby and Renee's hearing turned into a ring as she opened fire around the corner. Brutes growled in the distance as she could see Sangheili civilians in the higher tiers of the buildings, hiding or protecting their children, she had no idea. The way the Sangheili culture worked, she didn't know how they would fight or defend.

Two rounds flew from the scorpions heading towards them as the brutes slowly retreated back, and Renee and her section provided covering fire as the HAMMER drone sprayed the area. She hid behind one armor panel as it slowly crept forward, as this one had a spare ARGUS drone attached to the back as well as an extended ammunition carriage. There was no missile launcher equipped on it though, and the stanchion rifle was removed for expanded armor. It still had its grenade launcher however. John moved up and fired a Spartan laser at a distant Wraith.

"Move up!" she ordered as she noticed HEV pods dropping from above. Buck's squad was going to be landing somewhere in the city, and they had to meet up with them and another section to move forward.

Renee noticed a group of brutes moving around in a window nearby, and she pushed a grenade into her rifle and fired it. The arc was clean enough to go in and blow, as they all heard the explosion and the dying sounds of the brutes.

"No more contacts!" one of her squad said.



"I got clear!" another replied as they checked their corners.

John ran forward as the HAMMER drone followed him specifically, tied to his armor. Renee continued with it as it was a mobile shield and weapons platform, and the warthog followed them along with the rest of her section. A needle rifle round shot out from down one of the streets and pierced into one of her soldier's arms, and he twirled around and landed on his back moaning.

"Man down!" she barked as Milo grabbed his armor vest from the back and pulled him behind the warthog as the 50 opened up. The brute tried to run but the barrage of rounds flipped it and chewed its leg off. It went down quickly after.

Renee waited as the medic saw the shard embedded into his arm and pulled it out quickly and threw it away before it exploded. The shard bounced on the ground and blew as everyone covered their faces. Little shards sprayed them but didn't really do anything.

"Shit, things are like frag grenades if you're too close" Milo growled. Renee nodded and looked down at her marine. She should have kept a better eye on the side streets for snipers.

"How you doing Goat?" the medic asked. Corporal Gotze gave him a thumbs up with his other arm as the medic bandaged him up.

"You good?" Renee asked.

"I'm still capable of popping heads" Goat responded. He was a heavy support and was carrying a G290 multi, a man portable HMG. It was a 9.2mm machine gun that wasn't very accurate, but could carry enormous amounts of ammunition and keep suppression fire up. The advantage it had was that the barrel was actually tungsten layered, and didn't heat up very much, so jamming or problems didn't happen, or rarely did at least. Overall, it was a very reliable weapon, and one of the few man portable machine guns beyond detached AIE-486Hs or M247s.

"Don't push it, you feel your arm dropping, you say something got it?" Renee told him.

"Copy Sarge" he replied and chuckled. One thing they liked was Renee did in fact take care of the people under her. She wasn't very experienced, but she still kept an eye out for them. She didn't like soldiers dying.

"Ma'am, 4th column moving up" one of her marksmen said as the two scorpions headed out, and suddenly met up with a Rhino, a plasma based version of a scorpion.

"Now that I haven't seen in a long time" John replied. Rhinos hadn't been used since 2549, when the last few were supposedly destroyed in distant battles on Arcadia. They were potent weapons platforms, as their rounds were directed similar to a scorpion, but had the punch of a wraith.

Renee looked up as she saw some glinting object fly above and launch a salvo of missiles. It looked like twelve of them fired. She knew damn well it wasn't a Sabre or a Black Blade, as the Sabre had a

different look and the Black Blade wouldn't have even been seen in the darkness. She wondered who owned the thing as it turned around and flew towards another area over a mountain range.

Falken stormed to the bridge still wearing her suit along with Aldric as their fighters were being rearmed. Elena stood there waiting.

"Ma'am, what's going on? Who are those guys?" Aldric asked.

"I'd like to ask that question myself General, if you would be so inclined as to provide an answer" Falken told them. Despite Falken being a bitch, she was in Raven Squadron, and was in fact watching out for them. She didn't like competition.

"You'll get your answer once I have time to review the information" Elena told them professionally. Being a General was becoming easier and easier for her. She seemed to have matured into the job quite well, despite her young age.

"But we do have information on them correct? I've never seen those fighters before" Aldric said.

"I haven't either, this must be their maiden battle. Get back to your fighters and continue out once you're rearmed" Elena told them.

"But ma'am-" Aldric tried to say.

"I said get back to your fighters Commander. I'll handle it" she said and looked at him. He knew an order when it happened, even when she didn't say it was an order.

"Yes ma'am" Aldric replied and saluted and walked out. Falken just stood there.

"Yes Colonel?" Elena asked.

"Ma'am, I know we have our differences right now, but those thingsâ€¦ this is why Raven squadron needs to step it up. We have to be better than those cowboys out there" she explained. Elena was still annoyed with her training regimen, but at least understood where she was coming from.

"They ARE better than those cowboys Colonel, of that I have no doubt after watching their combat tactics. They rely too much on their defenses to keep them going" she responded.

"Ma'am, check this out" Dariah told her and motioned her over. Elena and Falken walked over and watched the screen. Another icon, Eagle 1-1 flew out from the \_Infinity\_.

\*\*[Music: HAWX 2 â€" Eagle's Rising]\*\*

The fighter shot off towards a group of fighters and splashed them quickly, relying on extreme speed and dodged the attacks.

"That one doesn't act like the othersâ€¦" Falken whispered and Elena actually agreed.

It shot off towards a brute frigate, an ugly looking thing, and

opened up its particle cannons and fired. The beams slammed into the side of the ship as well as lowered its shields at that spot. The fighter then charged up its nose laser, which was actually two linked lasers, the very same type of laser that the Black Blade Mk IIs had. The lasers cut into the armor and blasted into the ship, gutting the bridge and stopping the ship from responding to control. It just drifted in space.

The fighter then rotated sideways and fired its apogees to orient itself better, and corkscrewed around the side of the frigate and shot after a boarding craft and two Grendels. It made short work of each. Elena cocked an eyebrow. Someone was almost as good as she was, but she was still better.

Falken glanced up at her as Elena crossed her arms over her chest. If she felt competitive, she didn't show it. Elena continued watching over the other icons moving around as Dare coordinated the carrier to move with the others. The carriers were always supposed to stay away from the combat, but didn't shy away from it if it came to them. The main capital ship fights were between the battleships and cruisers against brute ships, with destroyers mixing it up nearby. The frigates were assisting the carriers and battleships against fighters, and prowlers were staying out of the fight to provide intelligence and advanced sensors for the whole battle, which they excelled at. They also dropped mines where they could that were non-nuclear.

Eagle 1 continued its withering attacks, and Elena counted.

"28â€¦ 29â€¦30â€¦" Elena whispered.

"Thirty kills?" Falken asked.

"No, thirty missiles, ten more than the Black Blades. No Vulcans from the looks of it, rail guns, particle cannons, speed is somewhat slower than the Black Blade but still high, lasers standard. No micros. Shields look doubled over the Black Bladeâ€¦ spare generator more than likely. It's a heavy hitter, no finesse. Designed to finish a target before they can respond more than likely" Elena analyzed the fighter. She watched as Eagle 1 dodged some attacks, and returned fire.

"Falken, get back to your fighter and get out there. Just because they're charging into the fray doesn't mean you should let them do it alone, they're still friendly" Elena told her. Falken nodded and saluted her and then walked off the bridge. Elena turned back to the view screen and watched intently.

\*\*[Five hours later]\*\*

Elena rubbed her eyes as she walked towards the hangar. The battle was won, and there were only a few casualties, less than one hundred on the ground, and far fewer in the sky. The brute fleet was shattered or fled, and Raven Squadron did its best to keep equal with Eagle Squadron.

She had to meet Admiral Hood on the \_Infinity\_ in half an hour to talk over tactics with him and some other Admirals and Generals, so she was leaving the \_Conundrum\_ and her squadron.

"Hey" Seth said as he walked up to her. He had completely disappeared during the battle as he helped Aaron with a classified assignment that he couldn't tell her about. Since it didn't directly involve him, he wasn't allowed to explain anything, not even where he went or how long it lasted. She just knew he was out of the pod now and nearby.

"Hey" she repeated and walked to him. He hugged her and kissed her, and she kissed back.

"Heard through the grapevine you saw a new fighter out there, and not Air Force, taking the glory" Seth asked her quietly.

"They were doing their job, nothing to worry about" she said simply.

"I detect a hint of jealousy there though. You don't like them pushing into your squadron's territory" he said and rubbed her shoulder blades. Elena growled.

"It's nothing alright? They did what they needed to do, and it was inevitable to see Navy fighters improve. The pilots are a bit reckless, but the fighter is sound" she told him. He tipped her chin up with one finger and looked into her eyes.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly. She sighed.

"Yeah, I'm sure" she told him. He gave her a peck on the lips and she smiled.

"You guys survived without me. See, you don't really need me out there unless the shit really hits the fan" he told her smiling.

"Yeah, stillâ€¦ would have been nice if you were there in person on the bridge. I know I know, you had a job to performâ€¦ andâ€¦" she trailed off.

"You saw what I did. I know, I was vicious, but those bastards had killed a lot of innocent people, people that didn't deserve to die at all. The collateral damage they produced was appalling, and even military don't do that. Gave them a taste of their own medicine" he told her.

"As long as I don't have to see that again in the future" she said.

"I promise if I have to do that again, you won't be there to see it ok? I'd rather not cause you nightmares" he told her and caressed her cheek. She leaned against his hand and held it with her own. He smiled as he brushed his thumb gently against her cheek.

"I have to go see Admiral Hood" she told him.

"I do too" he replied. Elena looked surprised.

"You don't report to him though" she responded.

"I still have to hear what he has to say, doesn't mean I have to answer to him. I am a liaison for my agency. Besides, I'd rather not

have to listen to him. We're not exactly seeing eye to eye" he told her and rolled his eyes.

"I take it you guys don't like each other?" she asked wincing.

"He's met me once, and I've done someâ€¦ it's complicated, I can't really explain what I had to do towards him" he said sighing halfway.

"He did something? Never would have expected him to do something that would get your agency's attention" she said.

"As I said, it's complicated. Come on, I'm riding with you obviously" he said and put his arm around her shoulder. Both ODSs followed as they reached the hangar and the two Hell Jumpers walked off. They weren't coming for the trip.

Elena got buckled in as Seth sat next to her, and she desperately wanted to fly the pelican, but the pilot was already selected. She sighed as her hands were just lying in her lap. Seth grabbed one and squeezed it gently as the pelican closed its RORO and flew out of the hangar and towards the \_Infinity\_.

\*\*[Half hour later]\*\*

Elena and Seth were tired as it was close to one in the morning. The meeting wouldn't wait however. The pelican landed and the RORO opened. They both stepped out and were immediately greeted by Admiral Hood.

"Brigadier General Gripen. It's good to see you again, and alive obviously. We held out hope that you would be brought back to us" Hood smiled warmly to her.

"It's good to see you again sir" Elena saluted and Hood returned the salute.

"At ease General. I know it's late, but we needed to talk to you involving the next push" Hood told her.

"I understand, my pilots are ready" she replied. Seth remained silent. He was observing, and frankly didn't have to speak unless he wanted to. Admiral Hood couldn't tell him to do anything. He didn't have the authority. Even though Seth was a civilian four star general compared to Hood as a Fleet Admiral, Seth was still a senior department agent, and therefore that was considered a rank in its own right, and therefore placed him practically equal to Hood. Metfield had once offered to improve Seth's rank to General of the Military, a five star rank, but he declined. He didn't have a need for it in his contract, and he rarely needed to order anyone around if at all. Military was military, agents were agents. They thought differently.

"Ah, agent Franklin" Hood nodded to Seth. Seth nodded back.

"Admiral Hood" Seth responded and nodded. Elena could feel the tension between the two. Hood knew someone was responsible for an investigation against him in the past, far past, four years ago to be precise. He didn't know it was Seth.

Hood looked between the two and nodded and then walked towards the doors. Elena followed as Seth was right behind her. They left the hangar as marines saluted along the hallway in guard position, as they entered a tactical room. Four other Generals and two Admirals were there as well.

"Ah, Brigadier General Gripen, so nice to see you again" Major General Corrington said. They both shook hands.

"Good to be seen Corrington. Arling, Merins" she nodded to General Cory Arling and Admiral Marisa Merins. They nodded and smiled at her.

"Alright, let's be seated" Admiral Hood said as a chef brought them coffee and tea, as well as a few pastries. Seth sat away from them as he watched. It actually spooked the crap out of the other Generals in the room. They only saw ONI operatives, never one outside the military, and never one that didn't have any form of insignia on them. Seth was a black box, and that scared them. Good.

"Now, the brute fleet has been taken care of, but they might come back with reinforcements. There are still pockets of resistance happening down below, and the marines and Spartans are working on that. There are some underground landing tunnels we've been able to detect, and noticed brute fighters and even Kig-Yar ships leaving and attacking from them. This is where we need to talk" Admiral Hood explained. They all listened as he talked about where the tunnels were found.

"Now, hold just a moment" Admiral Hood said and pressed a button on a panel nearby. The door opened and one pilot walked in with a helmet still on. Elena could already tell they were wearing the very same flight suit Raven Squadron wore. Elena was irked but quickly hid it.

The pilot took off the helmet and suddenly everyone noticed it was a woman, a very good looking woman to be exact. She had a bob similar to Cortana's, but she was platinum blonde with piercing ice blue eyes.

"Colonel Aurora Shrike reporting sir" she saluted with her helmet under her arm.

"At ease Colonel. General Gripen, this is Eagle 1, and she's in charge of Eagle Squadron" he told her. Aurora looked at her and a small smile curled on her face. Elena couldn't tell if she was happy to meet her or happy she showed off outside. She didn't fly like Elena did, but she was fast and hit her mark quickly, and Elena had learned she liked quick and strong strikes before flying in long arcs to let her energy weapons recharge. She was actually quite good at evading enemy fire, though Elena knew she had yet to take on Precursor fighters.

"Ma'am" Aurora saluted her and Elena saluted back. She still had the smirk on her face.

"Now, due to the requirements of the next mission, we need to weed out the fighters hiding in those tunnels. We've decided" Admiral Hood told Elena.

"Raven and Viper Squadron could go in there and complete the assault, allowing Spartans to continue in" Elena said.

"Sorry Gripen, but no. Eagle Squadron will be going in. They have missiles designed to move through the area, and more than one hard point for drone launchers. They can also JTOL. Raven Squadron will be providing escort and patrol" Admiral Hood told her. Elena didn't show it, but she was in shock. Raven Squadron had always been at the forefront of attacks, and now they were being sidelined.

"Sir? The Black Blade is capable of JTOL as well, and carrying similar missiles. More drones doesn't equal quicker response to the aggression of the brutes" Elena explained.

"But the fighters aren't capable of taking significant damage in enclosed areas compared to the Falcata Mk Is" Colonel Shrike explained. Her smirk got a little bigger. She was showing off, despite just standing there. Elena shrugged it off, but she could see out of the corner of her eye Seth cock his eyebrow ever so slightly before going back to his passive face. She had now learned when he did that that something had happened that he noticed. One thing she realized was nothing got by him while he watched, ever. His memory was flawless, and his position away from everyone allowed him to see everything in the room. He was a walking human video camera.

"With all due respect sir, brute infantry weaponry wouldn't even punch through a Long Sword's armor let alone shields. Are you sure?" Elena asked.

"He's sure General" Aurora said. Elena looked at her and then at Admiral Hood.

"I'm sorry Gripen, but it's the best call. There are still other things for Raven Squadron to do" Hood told her. Elena held her tongue.

"Understood sir" she replied.

"Good, now, onto the rest of it" Hood said as he brought up a wire frame of the mountainous terrain.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena walked out with Seth, both tired. The coffee didn't do much to ebb the feeling of exhaustion they both felt. They were both ready to go to sleep. They headed towards the hangar just as Colonel Shrike walked towards them.

"Ma'am, I just wanted to say it will be an honor having Raven Squadron support us during our mission" she smiled. She was being professional while also taking a jab at Elena's squadron.

"Ravens are ready to do more than support, they lead, this is one time" Elena told her.

"Oh I know that, though it would be a bit difficult to do that with those somewhat€ well, fragile craft" Aurora kept smiling. She had just taken a strike at the Black Blades, Elena's pride and joy.

"Do you have something to say besides dancing around the bush

Colonel? Go on, say it, speak freely" Elena said and stood in front of her.

"Alright. Raven Squadron was good before, but we're better. You need to face it and move on. You were the prototype force for the next age, and now we're up to bat" Aurora explained. Elena was about to say something when Seth interjected.

"You better hope the enemy doesn't have a good pitcher or short stop or you're off the plate before you even knew what happened. There is only one inning in a battle" he replied. Aurora looked at him and then looked him up and down. Seth crossed his arms over his chest.

"Hmm, but there are multiple innings in the war. I'm sure we'll do well throughout the whole thing. You're not a General are you?" she asked.

"I cannot confirm nor deny that" he responded.

"Oh? So you might be? A civilian General? Interesting. Hmm, well, maybe you'd like to offer some advice later. I noticed you watched the entire situation. I'd like to see what you think about our battle report. Maybe, later, in the observation room?" she smiled and winked at him.

"I live on the \_Conundrum\_" Seth replied, not smiling.

"Hmm, pity. Maybe I'll come visit during downtime, see how everyone is doing there. You look like you don't exactly belong, so I guessâ€¦ the specialist that was brought with the fleet? Rumors about you, you know" she smiled coyly.

"And what rumors would those be?" he asked.

"Oh, little things, gossip. If you're interested I could tell you some of them later, you and me" she chuckled.

"Not interested, but thank you for the offer" he replied. Elena looked at him. He was showing no emotion on his face. He did it better than the Spartans even. He had to. He had to hide far more than the super soldiers ever did.

"Mmm, oh well, if you change your mind, I would still love to talk. It gets boring with the entertainment room and dancing alone" she told him. Elena looked at her.

"You dance?" Elena asked.

"Oh, I heard you do it too. I do ball room dancing. Maybe if you're lucky I'll teach you a few moves" she said smiling at Elena.

"I'm quite a bit higher up than ball room, I doubt you could keep up with me" Elena growled.

"Oh my, did I hit a nerve? Each type of dancing is no higher than the others. I thought you would know that?" Aurora said. Elena glared at her.

"Well, it was nice talking to you two. Maybe I'll see you again



later, without needing an escort" Aurora smiled and looked at Seth again, eyeing him up and down. He still kept his stone mask on.

"Doubtful. She's not an escort, I'm with her" Seth replied.

"Oh? Hmm, pity" Aurora said. Elena was about to say something but Seth nudged her. She did give her permission to speak freely.

"Have a safe trip back, though you could always stay here for the night" Aurora batted her ice blue eyes at Seth. She was doing everything to charm him. Elena couldn't tell if it was working right now. She was indeed beautiful. It was funny, Falken, Aurora, and her as well as Sarah were the ones that seemed to do well, and were in fact good looking. It wasn't always ugly women in the military. There were some very striking female pilots and soldiers around, as Renee was a testament to that with John. There were obviously others that looked like they were hit with the whole ugly tree.

"We'll decline, but thanks for the offer" Elena faked a smile and then frowned as she and Seth walked away. Aurora winked at Seth. Aurora leaned against the wall as they walked away and sighed as she watched Seth walking away. They both entered the hangar and got into the pelican. Elena was pissed. The pelican flew towards the Conundrum and they exited quickly, as Seth fought to keep up with her storming down the hallways and to her quarters. Marines leapt out of the way as she charged toward her room. She had a face on that would curdle new milk, she was that angry. They entered and Elena threw down her data pad on her desk quickly and sat down hard to take her shoes off.

"Hey, you ok?" Seth asked breaking his stone mask.

"No I'm not ok! God she makes me so angry!" Elena growled. Seth put his arm around her shoulders and gently hugged her.

"How dare she do that. Seriously, friendly competition is one thing, making it look like we're obsolete is another. Her squadron can't even control their damned fighters well enough to dodge attack quickly! They just blunder in firing at everything like some fucking Rhino!" she snapped.

"Hey, calm down" he said quietly as he leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I'mâ€¦ I really don't like her. She clearly made a pass at you as well" she growled.

"I know" he replied.

"And? What's your view?" she asked.

"No view, I'm not in on this. I do my thing, and she can keep her squadron. I don't have a connection to her" he replied.

"That's it?" she asked and stopped leaning against his shoulder to look at him.

"What? I'm not near her, I don't work with her. I'm with you, both job wise and relationship wise. What? You think I'm just gonna drop

you and head for her? Please! Did you see how she acted? Like some primed up princess expecting some prince to sweep her off her feet!" he chuckled as he looked at her. Suddenly, he realized it.

"You're jealous aren't you?" he said as he looked at her.

"No I'm not jealous" Elena growled and looked away from him.

"You are! You're jealous because she hasn't given up! Oh, this is rich. You thinkâ€| you think she has a chance at taking me away from you?" he asked.

"Does she?" she asked softly and looked back at him with a sense of hurt in her eyes. Seth saw it and tried to hug her, but she kept her distance.

"No! She doesn't! Look, I love you, stop thinking you're inadequate. You're amazing! She just mouthed to get to you! And you're letting her! I should know! I do that shit all the time!" he told her chuckling. She sulked as he started to rub her shoulders.

"You're really tense and annoyed for nothing. Look, I'm not interested in her, she's definitely not my type. You are. She didn't have to go out of her way to try and make her superior feel inferior when you have done things she has never tried before. You're better than her, and she probably feels inferior to you, so she attacked. She basically acted like the new kid bully in school. You'll show her up eventually" he said as he massaged her back. Elena kept looking away from him as he leaned over her shoulder and pushed her hair away, and started to kiss her neck. She shied away from his kissing.

"Oh come on" he said and tried to look her in the eyes.

"I'm not interested right now. I justâ€| I want to go to bed" she told him.

"Why are you getting angry at me? I didn't do anything wrong, I had your back the whole time" he said. She glared at him, but realized it was uncalled for when he backed off and looked at her in confusion.

"Fine, fine, whatever, when you calm down I'll start back up, sheesh" he said and went into the bathroom. She realized it was uncalled for with how she treated him. He really didn't do anything wrong, she was just so frustrated with how Raven Squadron had gotten side lined while Eagle Squadron was getting all the glory. Raven Squadron never acted poorly towards other squadrons, always helping; working with them, not against them. In the end, they were in the fight together.

Elena got up and wrapped her arms around his waist as he brushed his teeth. She leaned her head against his back and sighed.

"I'm sorry. I justâ€| she gets my blood boiling, that's all" she told him.

"I know, and don't worry, they always get what's coming to them" he told her. She ran her hands over his chest gently as he spit out the foam in his mouth and washed. He turned around with a hand towel as

she looked up at him.

"Sorry. You're not my enemy, and I know that" she said and kissed him.

"I'm not, and I forgive you. Later, once this is done, we'll have some time just to ourselves ok? Don't worry, everything will work out, just keep your personal squadron working hard and they'll stay on top" he told her as he ran his fingers up and down her back. She nodded and kissed him again.

"I love you" he told her.

"I love you too" she said smiling.

"Sleep would be loved as well now, with you of course" he said and she chuckled.

"Definitely wanted" she said and they both got ready for some sleep. They wouldn't be waking up at 0600 in the morning as they were close to 0300 right now. Both of them slid into bed and were out like a light next to each other, but Elena didn't have decent dreams. The dreams were not about Seth doing what he did to the rebels, but how Aurora was competing. Her dreams revolved around her fighter not moving correctly, going slow and not able to fire her guns while Aurora shot by and took every target out. Elena just couldn't sit still in bed and tossed and turned as Aurora's giggles and laughs were heard over the coms in her dream. Seth finally grappled her and held her close as she realized she was keeping him from sleeping as well. She relaxed and cuddled with him as he let go and she finally got some much needed rest.

(Author's Note: Well! New kid on the block showing up Elena! She's gonna have to fix that, but how no one knowsâ€¦ except me of course. Seth is a bitâ€¦ freaky when it he wants to be. And Aurora looks to be a hottie! New fighter! Which is a rip off of the Black Bladeâ€¦ but it's new! Still a rip offâ€¦ Please Review!)

### 13. Love Stinks, Ya Ya

\*\*[1210 hours, April 14\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth woke up to find Elena not in bed. He looked around and saw she wasn't even in the quarters. He blinked away sleep and got out of bed to find a note put on a data pad. He checked it and read:

"Hey, had to slip away for an hour or two, didn't want to wake you. Problems with the fight down below, Master Chief John-117 got hit by a grenade to the shoulder, has flak in his arm. Renee got knocked around from a destroyed warthog. Just worried about them that's all. I've headed to the medical bay and a few other areas." Love,  
Elena

Seth read the note and put the data pad down. He sighed and went into the bathroom and took a shower, and then brushed his teeth. He walked out, not even brushing his hair as there wasn't enough length to care, and walked over to put his clothes on. He saw a notice on the terminal saying there was a file on his data pad that was sent. He

brought it up as he put his shoes on and read it.

Colonel Aurora Shrike. Her file appeared quickly, even though he didn't ask for it. A note was placed on it.

"Take a look at this, same augments a Spartan 4 has. Someone has been digging into others projects while working on their own. It doesn't exactly concern us, but you should take a look. This better not be Halsey up to her old tricks "M" the note said. He already knew it was from Metfield. Seth looked confused and shrugged, then opened the file. What he read was interesting. Graduated top of her class two years after Elena, accuracy during combat tests exemplary, went to private school before the academy and something else.

"Admiral Hood's daughter?" he whispered to himself. DNA tests were a match. He had an ex-wife from the past who divorced him do to unknown circumstances in the file, though if he wanted to he could dig them up quite quickly with Tachi's assistance. Cortana would more than likely decline the offer. Raised in England until the age of eighteen, had a private tutor, was an aristocrat. Knighted. Seth cocked his eyebrow briefly at reading that. Her mother kept her maiden name, and so did she. Went through Nellis AFB training. She was almost Elena's equal. Almost being the main word. Elena had already proven she adapted far more quickly to overwhelming odds. She was incredible under pressure.

He read through the ranks and timeline for her receiving her ranks. Lieutenant, then Captain almost immediately after, Major followed by Lt. Colonel and then Colonel, all in a year. He whistled. It wasn't like Elena's where she suddenly jumped a portion of the rank structure, she went up quickly through the ladder. He checked the reasons right after.

Captain due to injury of flight leader, Major due to placement into a previous squadron and the reformation of it due to it being entirely destroyed, Lt. Colonel due to countless ambushes during another battle on the brute border and almost single handedly keeping the squadron alive, and finally Colonel due to transfer to Eagle Squadron. What he couldn't figure out was that she was a Spartan 4. He looked at the next file that suddenly showed top secret, ONI classified and brushed the lock down aside. That meant nothing to him, as he had beyond the clearance it took to open the file.

She went through Spartan 4 augmentation procedures and proved to excel at piloting beyond anyone's dreams from the Navy, though they obviously had never seen Elena fly. Similar augments to Aldric 4-102. Seth had wondered what Aldric's last name was. He never told anyone it, and Spartan 4s were now in fact real soldiers who were selected and given the chance to become one, no longer children taken from their families to be bred to fight.

What he wanted to know was what the fighter was. He looked through the information as he didn't much care about every little detail. Elena might, but it wasn't his cup of tea. He just wanted to know if it was a cheap knock off of the Black Blade Mk II. What he saw surprised him. The fighter itself was built off of a previous design that the Black Blade Mk II was also built from, a joint project. He accessed the file to try and find the original fighter, but there was none there. Seth furrowed his brow in confusion. Why wasn't it there? He checked and cross checked background information for the names of

the fighter, but all he got were errors. The files were deleted. He sighed and put the data pad down after he locked it.

"Tachi" he suddenly said.

"Yes Seth?" he asked over the bone mic in his ear.

"I need you to find something out about a previous fighter model, basis point for the Black Blade Mk II and Falcata Mk I. Check to see if anyone has submitted a previous design in the past twenty five years, I don't care how many there are. Search parameters are for high end combat, high g-force control, advanced weaponry as well as potentially classified" Seth told him.

"Should I add stealth in the list as well?" Tachi asked him. Seth thought for a moment.

"No, only the Black Blade Mk II does that, the Falcata relies more on weaponry and defense. I'd still like to know what both of them are based on. Get back to me on it once you've found anything, no rush" he told the AI.

"Sure thing" Tachi said and the coms went silent. Seth got his shoes on and walked out of the room and down to the DFAC. He was hungry, starving even, and he needed to get something in his system. He walked to the counter and grabbed a tray, and noticed there wasn't much of a line. He got a heaping plate of food and sat down in the middle table, where Elena usually sat. It was interesting he noticed that she never stayed in the admiral's club, and always sat with the NCOs. Maybe she felt a kinship with the bullet slingers more than the people who gave orders. It was one of the things he liked about her. She was pretty down to earth about some things.

\*\*[Music: Parry Gripp "Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom"]\*\*

Seth rubbed his hands together as he looked at his tray. He dug into his food quickly, and leveled the tray. Everyone nearby him watched and stopped their own eating as he just inhaled his food. He sucked down the three drinks he had like they were air. People were just staring and blinking at his amazing scarfing skills. He finished and let out a small burp. He looked around and shrugged as a few giggled at him.

He picked his tray up and put it on the trashcan and walked out, and decided to head to the entertainment room. He noticed a group of marines apparently playing Dungeons & Daggers. They nodded at him and he nodded back. He sat down on the couch and turned on the TV and turned on a console.

"Golstaff, you have entered the door to the north. You are now by yourself, standing in a dark room. The pungent stench of mildew emanates from the wet dungeon walls-" one guy says.

"Where's the Cheetos?" another says as he digs through the small mini refrigerator in the corner.

"They're right next to you" the first marine says.

"I cast a spell!" the third marine says.

"Where's the mountain dew?" the second asks.

"In the fridge! Duh!" the first marine grumbles.

"I want to cast a spell!" the third marine says getting annoyed.

"Can I have a mountain dew?" The second asks.

"Yes you can have a mountain dew! Just go get it!" the first growls.

"I can cast any of these right? On the list?" the third marine asks.

"Yes, any of the first level ones" the first marine explains.

"I'm gonna get a soda anyone want one? Hey Grimm I'm not in the room right?" the second asks.

"What room?" the first asks him.

"I want to cast magic missile!" the third says excitedly.

"The room he's casting all these spells from!" the second says.

"He hasn't cast anything yet!" the first growls at him.

"I am though if you'd listen! I'm casting magic missile!" the third tells him.

"Why are you casting magic missile? There's nothing to attack here" the first asks. The third seems to think for a second.

"Iâ€¦ I'm attacking the darkness!" the third jokes. All of them laugh.

"Fine, fine, you attack the darkness. There's an elf in front of you" the first says as the third looks surprised.

"That's me right?" A fourth marine chimes in.

"He's wearing a, uh uh, brown tunic, and he has grey hair, and blue eyes-" the first explains.

"No I don't, I have grey eyes" the fourth tells him.

"Let me see that sheet" the first asks and tries to look at the character sheet.

"Well, it says I have blue, but I decided I wanted grey eyes" the fourth explains.

"Whatever, ok you guys can talk to each other now if you want" the first tells them.

"Hello" the third says.

"Hello" the fourth responds.

"I am Golstaff, sorcerer of light" the third says.

"Then why did you have to cast magic missile" the fourth jokes and they all start laughing.

"You guys are being attacked" the first tells them.

"Do I see that happening?" the second asks.

"No! You're outside, by the tavern!" the first growls.

"Cool! I get a drunk!" the second tells him.

"There are seven ogres surrounding you" the first explains.

"How can they surround us? I had Mordenkainen's magical watchdog cast" the third snapped.

"No you didn't!" The first one snaps back.

"I'm getting drunk! Are there any girls there?" the second asks.

"I totally did! You asked me if I wanted any equipment before this adventure and I said no! But I need material components for all my spells! So I cast Mordenkainen's faithful watchdog!" the third explains annoyed.

"But you never actually cast it" the first explained.

"Roll the dice to see if I'm getting drunk" the second tells them. The first marine rolls some dice and sighs.

"Yeah! You are!" the first growls.

"Are there any girls there?" the second asks.

"Yeah!" the first responds annoyed.

"I did though! I completely said when you asked me!" the third snaps at him.

"No you didn't! You didn't actually say you were casting the spell! So now there's ogres ok" the first snaps back.

"Ogres? Man I got an ogre slaying knife! It's got a plus 9 against ogres" the second says.

"You're not there! You're getting drunk!" the first yells.

"Ok but if there are any girls there I wanna DO them!" the second tells him. Seth is getting really amused at the scene happening. He shakes his head and decides it isn't in his best interest to stay there and play any games, and decides to go to the observation room for some peace and quiet. He goes to Elena's quarters and grabs a book pad and brings it with him and then walks to an observation room.

He steps in and sits close to a shadowy corner, away from the rest of the seats. He starts to read, and after an hour, the door opens. In walks someone he did not expect and he had to do a double take.

Aurora.

\_Fuck.\_

He looked down at his book and tried not to be noticed. She had brought a book and was wearing casual clothing, not a flight suit, so she didn't come on business. It wasn't uncommon for soldiers to transfer between ships during downtime to see friends while they had a chance. They simply waited until there were enough people to transfer before doing it due to the fuel required, though it could be regained.

She sat down and almost immediately looked up and was surprised to see him hiding in the corner.

"Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise" she said smiling at him.

\_Fuck fuck fuck, go away, go away! Shoo! Fuck off! Go fuck yourself somewhere else! I'm not interested!\_

Seth glanced up at her and she smiled at him warmly.

"Hello" he responded and looked back down at his book.

"I had been meaning to apologize for what you saw last night, I feel awful. It's just a friendly rivalry between pilots that's all" she explained and changed her position to a chair across from him.

\_Fuck.\_

"Apology accepted" he replied and continued to try and read.

"Good, I didn't want our first meeting to go badly. Your name isâ€¦| Seth?" she asked. He looked up at her and she had a catty grin on her face. He had no idea if she was playing with him or interested.

"Agent Franklin" he replied simply.

"Oh? An agent? Hmm, that sounds so interesting. What's it like I wonder?" she asked curiously.

"Can't tell you, you aren't one" he replied.

"Awww, don't be that way. I could tell you what it's like to be a pilot" she told him still smiling. He was having difficulty breaking eye contact with those icy blue eyes. If he did, she might say something else, and it would probably involve something stupid from what he thought. He didn't understand what she was getting at. Was she trying to get him to get away from Elena? He wasn't the type to be unfaithful to someone he cared about. Either Elena dumped him or he put his effort in to make it work, that was how it was going to happen. And Elena did not want to dump him from what he saw.

"That's nice" he replied and looked out the window.

"Yes, it's a great feeling. Launching from a mag rail, flying at high speeds, the feel of the flight stick between my legsâ€¦| the ride.



It's all so amazing, almost as good as sex" she told him. He blinked.

\_Fuck.\_

"Uhuh" he replied.

"I would guess you don't fly very often? Or maybe you haven't gotten a chance to fly in one of the newer models? Maybe, if you're interested, I could help with you feeling the same thing?" she asked.

"Which one?" he asked with no emotion. He immediately regretted saying that. It was in his nature to dance around questions with his own. It tended to give more intel.

"Whichever you want" she told him seductively. She winked at him. He blinked, still unmoving.

\_You have to be kidding me. WHAT A CORNY LINE! I've seen Thelma do better than that and she doesn't even seduce!\_

The door opened and Aurora leaned back in her chair and winked at him. He sighed and went back to reading his book just as Elena walked in and looked around. She spotted him in the corner and then spotted Aurora.

"Oh, hello General, we were just talking" Aurora said smiling. Elena looked at Seth and he gave her a look.

\_You really don't want to know.\_

"Fine. Seth, I would like to talk to you" she said. Seth looked at Aurora briefly and then back at her.

"Away from here, if you aren't busy" she said looking at Aurora as well.

"Don't mind me sweetie, I'm just sitting here reading, unless you want me to listen" she almost purred the end at Seth. He almost immediately got up and walked to Elena.

"I hope we can talk again later" Aurora called after him and giggled. They both walked out of the room.

"Hey, what did you-" Elena tried to say but Seth suddenly grabbed her and kissed her passionately. She leaned into the kiss and they finally broke.

"What was that for?" she asked confused.

"To let you know that I love you, and would never, ever, hurt you with another woman, especially from what I just heard from her" he told her. Elena glanced over at the door.

"Ah. I take it she wanted you between the sheets?" she asked. Seth nodded quickly.

"What was your response?" she asked.

"I actually didn't respond. I hope she takes that as a fuck you" he replied. She smirked a bit.

"Exactly which fuck you?" she asked. He chuckled.

"The bad kind, without any soothing cream or lube, preferably with spikes" he told her smiling.

"Eep, she might actually like that though" Elena told him jokingly.

"Let's not get our mindset into what she does and does not like please? She clearly has it out for me, and I'd like to run away right now. What did you want to talk about?" he asked.

"It's about us" she said looking away.

"Hey, I didn't do anything wrong, I am being loyal, I haven't-" he started to say and she put a hand up to stop him.

"No no, nothing like that, don't worry. I meant involving our time together. I sadly have a bit on my plate right now. John just had the flak removed from his arm, and Renee has a concussion. With the new squadron shooting around trying to take everything from us, I have to keep on my toes to grab mission assignments for my wings before whoever is in charge of Eagle squadron talks to Hood. I justâ€¦ I don't want you to feel like I'm ignoring you ok?" she told him.

"Hey, I'm an easy going guy. I know we're in a war zone, so just see me when you can, that's all. Remember, I have a job to do too right? Andâ€¦ I should probably tell you about that now that you've said you're busyâ€¦" he said and rubbed the back of his neck.

"You've got a lot to work on as well?" she winced.

"Yeah, well, Aaron does. Most of my files were transferred to him because Thelma is handling some covert long term operations, and I need to help him where I can. But don't worry, it's not like I'll be in the pod the whole time, justâ€¦ I might come "home" late a lot" he explained. She smiled at him and shifted her weight on her opposite leg.

"That's ok, as long as you come home each time. Maybe, you'll have time to eat during the breaks?" she asked him.

"Yeah, actually I will. Three main meals, three minor meals in between, and then there's a break I usually take middle of the day to review intel. I'll do my best to hang with you during those times" he chuckled at her.

"Thanks. Obviously you'll send me a note telling me you're eating right?" she asked.

"Of course, no worries about that" he replied.

"Good. Well, I'm sorry, but I just came to tell you that. I need to get back to tactical" she told him and gave him a kiss.

"Love" he told her.

"Love back" she replied and smiled as she walked off. He sighed with a smile on his face and walked towards the 2nd lab.

\*\*[2340 hours, April 14\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ UNSC Infinity Class Carrier \*\*\_\*\*Conundrum\*\*\_\*\*, Orbiting Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth got out of the pod and enjoyed the fact he was no longer covered in a gel like film from the new fluid used. He was just damp. He took a towel as today he didn't do much strenuous activity with Aaron, and simply located and placed digital markings on multiple hidden bases for non-nuclear ICBMs to drop. It was very easy and there were little to no problems beyond one missile misfiring its rocket engine and sitting in space. Another was fired quickly after to compensate.

"Everything looked good Seth, we're done today obviously" Dr. Montez told him.

"Yeah, good, time to get some sleep" he replied and got his clothes on, which was simply casual attire. He didn't wear his uniform if he could avoid it if the day involved pod work.

"Quick to get back?" Dr. Montez asked.

"I have someone to get back TO now, so yeah" he replied with a smile.

"We did good work today. See you in the morning" Dr. Montez said and walked out carrying his tea. He was tired as well, and Jenny followed after Seth as they went through the decontamination room, and then left. Jenny broke from following and went towards her quarters on another deck while Seth continued right and towards another lift. He knew Elena had been busy observing Eagle Squadron's efforts inside the tunnels previously as he had snuck a peek before shooting back to Aaron. The Falcata had hovered in place launching ten ARGUS drones a pop, like little swarms of bugs heading inside the hive to take out invaders. Aurora had been there leading the whole thing, and Elena had to just sit back and watch Raven Squadron fly nearby for anything that came out or tried to intercept them. Nothing did. The Falcata had sprayed the entrances of the tunnels judiciously with firepower however.

As he reached the next corner and was about to get to the lift, he saw someone he expected was on the \_Infinity\_. Aurora was again on board. He couldn't figure her out. Who the hell was friends with her? He then realized she might not act the same way to those close to her, though he didn't like how she acted towards Elena.

However, this time Aurora was leaned against a wall with another man, a pilot he realized was in Jones's squadron.

"Come on, give me another chance, please? I'm begging you" he asked with his hands clasped together.

"I'm sorry, but I believe I told you quite clearly. I'm not interested. What, you think I'd whore my body around? Get it in your head, I don't care about you" she told him in a bored tone.

"But, but I got you those drinks! A-and I also paid for thoseâ€¦ other thingsâ€¦" he trailed off.

"You chose to buy those, I didn't ask for that. I never did. Now please leave me alone. I'm a busy girl, and I don't need to be with desperate losers who can't take a hint. I'm not interested. Find someone else to cling to" she told him and started to walk away. He suddenly grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Come on, please? One chance, you'd be surprised! I'm a great guy!" he told her in a begging tone.

"Let go of me right now" she told him slightly fearful. Seth noticed the whole thing.

"Just one chance is all I'm asking! Please! Stop being such a stuck up bitch and just loosen up a bit" he told her and tried to pull her close to him.

"I said let go of me!" she threw a punch and he blocked it, and she followed with a kick that he stopped. They were both trained in the same close quarters, so it was likely since he had more strength he'd win.

"Let go of me!" she screamed and Seth stormed up. Regardless of whether she was annoying or not, no one should treat a woman like that.

The pilot looked back and saw him coming and let go to talk to him.

"Hey man, I was just trying to talk things over with her, nothing bad hap-" he tried to say but Seth threw a punch that the guy dodged, but he was already bringing his knee up and caught the dodge and turned it into a strike to his chest. The pilot grunted and Seth followed with another punch to his gut as he leveled off from the impact. The pilot threw him own punch and Seth grappled it and threw him by him while throwing another punch right into his face, increasing acceleration with the pilot flying by him. He slammed into the ground.

"Fuck! God damn it! Alright alright I'm leaving! Shit!" the pilot said as he got up and backed completely off and ran down the hallway. Seth just stood there watching him go.

"Thank you. My hero" Aurora said almost squealing as she grabbed his arm and rubbed her cheek up and down on it. Seth was a little worried with her actions.

"Are you alright?" he asked simply.

"Of course, now that you're here. You really handled that well. I'm in your debt, and I always pay my debts" she said with a smile.

"No need, just assisting when it was needed" he said flatly. She still kept smiling. Did she like the tin man routine? He had no idea.

"You should be on the \_Infinity\_, not here this late" he told her.

"Oh, but I just had to see a friend of mine here. And then he came along and tried to join in on the conversation. I was so not interested, but youâ€¦" she trailed off as she started to trace circles over his arm with her finger.

"I'm taken" he told her.

"Oh boo hoo, you're no fun. You know, being a General is a busy job. A Flag Officer is constantly away from family. It must be hard on you being with someone who's hardly nearby. You might pick up a few friends here" she said pouting at first, and then going back to her seductive voice.

"I have friends on board" he told her.

"You could add one more to your list. A closer one" she told him.

"Didn't you just say you didn't whore your body out a minute ago? I think with me being with someone that you would understand what the closer tends to entail" he responded trying to get her to go into a loop, looking like a hypocrite.

"Because an even closer friend can hope to get you to look at her more than the other" she told him.

"So you're trying to steal me away. Not happening. You're something else, seriously" he growled.

"A girl has to keep her standards high, and mine are very high, hence looking at you. The heart changes from one moment to the next. I wonder, where will your heart be once your girlfriend spends more time at her work, or dancing with that Commander hmm? You don't think they just dance vertically do you?" she smiled. There was no way. Seth trusted Elena. She would never do that, she would actively seek him out to be with him. It was a classic doubt she was trying to ingrain into his mind, make him be discouraged with Elena and gravitate towards her with open arms. Besides, Aldric had already shown affection to Sarah, though it was secretly when they didn't think anyone was around.

"I'm pretty sure that's not happening, though it's interesting that you'd try to lie about it. You must be desperate to try that with me. Now, are we done here? You should head back to your ship" he told her.

"I didn't lie, as you never know what's going on between them. And I'm hardly desperate, as you can easily see how quickly others throw themselves at me. I'm interested in a man that can keep up with me. You're being dragged down Seth, held down by everything" she told him. He scoffed and looked at the lift.

"I'm heading back to the person who's supposedly "dragging me down" and sleeping in her bed, not yours. Nice try. Go back to your ship" he said and walked towards the lift.

"Wait! Won't you at least escort me to the hangar? That man might try something again. You wouldn't leave me to fend for myself would you?" she pouted. Ack. The chivalry attack. Works every time. She went at

his honor. She couldn't see from the angle as he was facing the lift, but his left cheek twitched once. He sighed and looked back at her. She put on an innocent face and had her hands behind her back, with the toe of her boot squishing some invisible bug or cigarette on the ground.

\_You gotta be kidding me.\_

"Fine" he told her and walked towards the hangar. She looked excited and as she walked next to him, she grabbed a hold of his arm. He stopped and looked down at her annoyed.

"Oh come on, I don't biteâ€¦ much, and not here. I feel safer doing this. Please?" she asked pouting. He rolled his eyes and walked down the hallway, with a few marines and crewmembers walking by. He suddenly realized it wasn't a good idea to let her hang on his arm. Others would get the wrong idea and think he was cheating on Elena. She was probably in bed waiting for him right now.

He walked her to the hangar and got her to a pelican.

"Fine, hangar found. Bye" he said.

"Wait! Thank you" she smiled and gave him a sudden peck on the cheek. He pulled away from her quickly and stared at her. She batted her eyelashes at him and giggled like a schoolgirl. Half of his face was falling in annoyance.

\_When you least expect it, I'm going to blow up a toilet near you. Just you wait. Or make your hair dryer go on crispy mode and frazzle your hair. Or something. I'm devising shit as we stand here. I'm called Poltergeist for a reason toots.\_

"Don't do that again" he grumbled.

"Oh alrightâ€¦ next time would be on the lips, gotcha" she smiled.

"Hi, I'm taken, that means I'm with someone, and I'm loyal to her" he growled at her.

"And I can wait until things change. I can be patient" she giggled.

"Things aren't changing. At all. Recognize. Seriously. Nothing is going to happen between you and me" he told her slowly, trying to get it into her head.

"I recognize that things may not be going to plan with you being on this ship with her, what with being separated all the time. Must be lonely" she told him.

"We both have jobs to do, that's how life works" he told her annoyed. She was clueless to how relationships worked. It wasn't a happily ever after, it was just love and then work and the rest of their life, and hopefully it was his life mingled with Elena's forever.

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. But you have to find the sugar to mix in. So far, for you, all I see is lemons coming from

her" she said smiling. He glared at her.

"You've got some nerve to-" he started to say as she had just dissed Elena.

"Ready for takeoff, last flight out" the pilot in the cockpit said.

"Some people have different tastes. Somehow, I peg you for someone who has a sweet tooth. You're not supposed to be held down and wait for others. Hmm, I wonder, what's your sign?" she asked playfully.

"No sign, I'm not giving you a sign, my sign is a black hole" he growled annoyed and very frustrated. He didn't blow up unless he was really pushed.

"Oh, you must have one. I'm a Leo if you're wondering" she said.

"I'm not" he told her.

"Oh don't be like that! I'm just asking a question, simply one little question. What are you?" she asked.

"A Leo" he told her annoyed and started to walk out of the pelican.

"Well then, I think we would turn heads. Hope to see you again soon. Chao!" she said and blew a kiss to him. He grumbled and groaned as he was about to walk back into the pelican when the RORO closed up and she winked at him.

"We're not together! Shit!" he snapped. She just didn't give up. He scratched his head furiously with both hands frustrated with her. He turned around to see Ezekiel standing there.

"What! We aren't!" he snapped and walked to the door as Ezekiel just blinked confused. Seth stormed to the lift and went up, and then finally got to Elena's quarters. He entered quietly as Elena was lying on her side in bed, fast asleep. He took his shoes off and clothes and slid into bed carefully, and cuddled up next to her. She shifted a bit, but overall knew he was there and put her arm over his arm that was lying over her stomach.

"Mmm, you're late" she told him still keeping her eyes closed.

"Yeah, well, I said I would be. Sorry" he told her and started to kiss her shoulder. She slowly turned her head as he moved to her neck.

"What? No, go to sleep, I need sleep, I had a long day" she whined to him and tried to turn over.

"Come on, it'll get you to sleep faster. You'll feel better. Stress relief" he told her.

"My stress relief is not having to worry about my squadrons tomorrow" she mumbled to him.

"You don't have to work tomorrow? Great" he told her.

"No! I have to! Multiple missions run in the same dayâ€¦ I have to keep an eye on them" she grumbled. He tried to run his fingers up her arm but she pulled the covers up to her neck. She really wasn't in the mood. He sighed and just leaned on his arm staring at her. She went back to sleep and he just lied there, thinking.

\*\*[0900 hours, April 15\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth woke up to an empty bed again. He sighed and looked at the terminal for a data pad with a note. Nothing. He sighed again and got up to take a shower and get dressed, and then went to the DFAC. He met Renee who had a bandage on her right cheek and John who had bandages running up his right bicep.

"You two look worse for wear, hope you're doing ok" he said as he set his tray down.

"We're better than we look, trust me" John told him.

"I don't doubt it. Hey, have you guys seen Elena anywhere? Skipped out to work quick this morning" he told them.

"She's got a lot on her plate right now, kind of wish the lowers would do their job. She's got two Colonels and two Lt. Colonels, two Majors, and two Commanders, and none of them can get their paperwork done?" Renee told him annoyed.

"I think they are getting their paperwork done, they just need her to sign it" he told her as he ate his scrambled eggs.

"I'm glad I don't have to worry about that. I go where I'm told, and point and shoot" she said and looked at John.

"And hopefully I go with her" he replied. She rubbed his left forearm gently.

"I don't think that would be a problem. I'm pretty sure they know we're connected at the hip these days" she said.

"Wish I was that way" Seth said as he continued to eat his eggs.

"Problems?" Renee asked.

"Not problems per se, justâ€¦ I don't know. I think coming on board was a bad idea. Elena's busy as hell and I understand that, and I'm busy too, butâ€¦ she keeps thinking I'm gonna run off with some Colonel who's been hitting on me left and right-" Seth told them.

"Colonel Shrike?" Both of them said in unison.

"You two know her?" he asked.

"It's all over the ship now. A few peopleâ€¦ wellâ€¦ saw you with her" Renee told him. She averted her gaze away from him towards her



food.

"Oh shit. Look, nothing happened, I escorted her to the hangar after some pilot tried to force himself on her or talk to her, or something, that's all. I'm loyal, you gotta believe me" he tried to convince them.

"We know, we know, justâ€¦ Elena got wind of it aboutâ€¦ twenty minutes agoâ€¦ she's a bit irked by it but didn't want to confront you" Renee told him.

"Hey, I didn't do anything, and if I have to, I'll stay the hell away from Shrike. I still don't understand why they have such a rivalry, it's completely different for what I do" he told them.

"You don't have competition in, well, whatever agency you work for?" Renee asked.

"Sort of, it's not the same as you see it. When one of us does something outstanding, we get to be rewarded for it, more leeway, higher ups notice you more, think you're the right man or woman for the next job, even though it might be more dangerous than the last one. In exchange, the ones who were competing pretty much have an easy clean up job after with follow up missions set up. Better than getting shot at every single time or thrown into some dangerous op that may not go so well. There's a balance between showing off, and getting a chance to relax. Babysitting isn't considered an annoyance for us, we actually like it once in a while so we don't stress out" he explained.

"Babysitting?" Renee asked and looked at John.

"Eh, sorry, that's what we call specific mission assignments that are so easy you can just sleep through them" he explained.

"Wish I got one of those once in a while" Renee chuckled.

"Then you wouldn't be with me" John told her.

"Yeah, that's a problem I'd guess, maybe notâ€¦" she replied, correcting herself.

"Hey, I should track my other half down and explain some things to her" he said and put his tray on the trashcan and waved goodbye to them. He now realized there was a rumor around the ship that he was hanging out with Aurora. That had to stop. He quickly made his way to the bridge and stopped right there when Elena was almost surrounded by officers giving her reports.

"Hey Elena" he said. She looked over at him and gave him a slight glare. He shook it off.

"I'll talk to you later" she told him.

"I should really explain stuff to you" he said.

"I said, I'll talk to you later, not now" she replied and still glared daggers at him. He sighed as he heard the commotion of what she needed to sign, where her squadrons were going, what they were doing compared to other squadrons in other wings, etc.

"Seth, Aaron could use some help if you're interested. Long term just a heads up" Dr. Montez said over his bone mic.

"How long term?" Seth asked as Elena still glared at him to leave.

"LONG long term. He found something" Dr. Montez told him.

"Classification?" he said as he looked at her.

"Yankee-Black" Montez explained. His eyes shot wide open. Something big just happened. He looked away from her and then looked back.

"Elena, this can't wait. I say it now or it never gets said. I got something I have to do" he told her.

"Later!" she said annoyed. He walked up to her and she stared at him angrily.

"Yankee-Black, long term, I say it now or you don't see me for two days to get my side" he whispered into her ear. She was about to pull away but Yankee-Black meant something to her. It was his clearance.

"Everyone hold on right now. This is important" she told them and walked with Seth into Dare's office. She locked the door.

"This better be damn good. Alright, let's hear this. What? What could be so important that you'd break me away from my duties? Hmm? Maybe you trying to fix what half the ship saw last night?" she asked.

"Nothing happened ok! She got attacked by one of YOUR pilots who had a crush on her! I simply escorted her to the hangar!" he growled.

"And one of my pilots said you never gave him a chance to explain! You clocked him one before he could get a word out!" she yelled at him.

"He was taking on a woman who was walking away and just wanted him to leave her alone! What the fuck do you expect me to do?" he growled at her looking confused.

"The way she treats people, I really could care less about what happens to her, she might have started the whole thing, did you listen to the whole conversation? No! You didn't! And now guess what? I have a pilot who got knocked around and was in the infirmary because my boyfriend took a swing at him for some girl who hung on his arm! And she wasn't me!" she yelled at him.

"She was afraid he'd come back if I didn't help! So she hung on my arm until I got her to the hangar! She said it made her feel safe!" he yelled back.

"Oh, so you're her knight in shining armor now? What, you change sides quick?" she snapped at him.

"What the fuck has gotten into you? No I haven't changed sides! What the fuck are you talking about! What side anyways? There is only us versus brutes for Christ sakes!" Seth growled at her.

"Navy versus Air Force! There has always been a rivalry between us. We've always been the better fliers!" Elena explained to him annoyed like he should already know this.

"They'd obviously like to say otherwise!" he told her.

"Oh so your defending her now?" Elena gawked at him.

"No I'm not defending her! I don't even know what the hell is happening! Look, nothing happened between us, she hung on my arm temporarily, that's it, she said some words, and that was that" he told her.

"What words? Did you try and get her off your arm? Did you try and explain you were with me?" she asked in an angry tone.

"Look at you! You're as jealous as a schoolgirl! She explained it made her feel safe, I explained I was taken" he told her.

"I got reports that you said you weren't together, with whom? Me?" she asked staring at him.

"What? By whom?" he asked confused.

"The pilot, Ezekiel, both of them heard it" she growled.

"No! I didn't mean you! I meant her!" he and looked around the room.

"How do I know you're not lying huh?" she asked.

"What?" he asked astonished.

"How do I know you aren't lying to me?" she asked again tapping her fingers on her forearm as she held her arms crossed over her chest.

"Are you serious?" he asked almost in shock.

"Yes I'm serious!" she yelled at him. He slowly shook his head with his mouth agape.

"This is insane, Elena you know me! I would never!... what, has the stress gotten you to lash out at people you care about?" he asked.

"And what about you? What am I supposed to think? Half the ship seems to think you hooked up with her behind my back! Why? Rumors tend to be squashed quickly when they reach officer's ears Seth! There seemed to be a lot of evidence to back their claims! And why were you coming back so late?" she asked him still annoyed.

"I told you I had to help Aaron finish some things! We were both running ops! You know I can't tell you about that!" he growled.

"Was she an op?" she asked and immediately regretted saying it. Seth stood there in stunned silence. Did she really ask if he had banged her behind her back?

"You know what? Think what you want to think, your mind is made up anyways despite me trying to prove otherwise with logic. You're hatred for her has turned you around to bite others heads off. I have a job to do too now. Don't expect me to show up for the next two days. But you'll just twist it into me trying to go see Aurora. You'd rather listen to half the crew versus your own boyfriend" he told her coldly.

"I don't want to believe it but there's evidence!" she yelled at him.

"Show me it!" he gritted his teeth at her. She pulled out a data pad and it showed the pelican pilot peeking out of the cockpit towards Seth and Aurora. She was smiling at him and giggling, but it barely showed his face. She winked and waved and the RORO closed up. It also showed the small kiss she gave him on the cheek.

"I was telling her I'm not interested!" he snapped.

"The pilot says otherwise from what he saw, a lover's tiff he explained" she said to him.

"Lover's tiff? Who the hell is this pilot anyways?" Seth asked.

"He's a pelican pilot belonging to-" Elena started.

"The \_Infinity\_?" he asked. Elena shut up quickly after that.

"You'd believe a pilot from another ship, more than likely a friend of Aurora, who is probably working with her to get you and I to break up? Wow. Nice one Elena, golf clap. Fucking hell, now we know what stress and jealousy does to you" he growled. Elena just glared at him, but was silent. He was right.

"Great, wonderful, fine. You know what? Do what you want right now, it's not like we'll be near each other for a bit considering you're busy and I'm busy. I won't be around for a few so you can yell at the walls for all I care about your little rivalry because I won't be there for you to do it to!" he snapped.

"Then maybe you should get your own quarters!" she growled and suddenly gasped at what she said. God she felt like an idiot when she was angry. She said the stupidest things, as her anger took control.

"Fine, if that's what you want, I'll give you some space, no problem. If this is what works, I'll do it. First stop, new room for me. I'll go get my things ASAP. I'm pretty sure there were some quarters available right near the lab!" he yelled.

"Fine!" she snapped and the entire time her brain was yelling "YOU IDIOT! APOLOGIZE TO HIM! SAY YOUR SORRY!" but she seemed to not be listening.

He stormed out of the room and out of the bridge as officers couldn't

hear the conversation with sound proof walls. She almost shook, with anger or sadness she had no idea. She held herself up against the desk as her legs felt weak. She had just told Seth off, for something she didn't know if it was true or not. Half of the crew had told her because they didn't want to see her get hurt. They had dated for maybe three weeks. She still didn't know how far Seth could go. If he was able to do what he did during a mission, was it possible he could lie to her since she wasn't around much? Maybe he was moving to have more free time with Aurora and not worry about Elena seeing them?

She shook her head. He wasn't like that. He cared about her. Things were a blur between them. The relationship was going so fast she felt almost like they were married with how they handled things. Maybe they needed time apart. They were both busy out in a war zone, so maybe this was time to reflect on who they were and where they were going.

Elena sighed and walked out of the room and out of the bridge. The officers were waiting for her, but stayed put until she came back. She walked to her quarters and entered to find Seth packing his things up.

"What are you doing?" she asked in her annoyed voice.

"What does it look like? Packing. We both need time to ourselves. You're stressed, and it doesn't feel good to be around, especially when you pin lies to people who are loyal" he snapped and continued to grab his clothes and threw them into a bag.

"Seth, stop this nonsense! Drop your things!" she scoffed.

"No! I'm doing what I said I'm doing! I know where I stand! I know I'm in the right here! You're just pinning your anger for her on me! That's what you do! You get angry at someone else and you lash out at the nearest person! I can only imagine what would happen if you have kids!" he snapped.

"Me? Where'd the we go?" she asked.

"Out the door until you can get your head on straight! You clearly don't want me if you seem to think I'd be so quick to leave you!" he yelled back.

"Well you're quick to get out of our quarters!" she yelled back.

"I'm quick to get out of YOUR quarters and away from YOUR insanity! Come talk to me when you're the woman I fell in love with and never abandoned! Right now the only thing you're doing is trying to find some way to be angry at me for no reason!" he yelled and picked up his things. She stood in stunned silence as he walked by her with his stuff and down the hallway.

"Riko, Tachi, I need a new room, preferably near the lab so I can work easier" he said over his bone mic.

"Why? What happened?" Riko asked.

"Elena and I have had an argument. We're giving each other some

breathing room. She's stressed, and I need to see what Aaron has for me. It'll get my mind off of this bullshit" he responded.

"About Aurora isn't it?" Riko asked softly.

"So even you know? I didn't do anything Riko, you above everybody know me better than that" he replied.

"I know, I know, butâ€¦ Elena has lost one person already, she might feel, well, she'll lose another to another woman" she told him.

"That's absurd, I'd never leave her!" he growled.

"You just sort of did. Didn't you say you'd never dump her?" Riko asked softly.

"No Iâ€¦ I'm just giving us some time to think. Things have gone a bit too fast, and she seems to think I'd just drop her in a heartbeat for another girl. I don't even like Aurora! She's snobbish andâ€¦ fucking hell, where to I begin? Looks only go so far! Hell, look at Falken!" he growled and just at that moment walked around the corner and saw Falken. She looked confused at the angry face he was making as he stormed by and got into the lift. The doors closed and the lift started to go down.

"You're right. Elena needs toâ€¦ she's got a lot to cope with in a short amount of time. Brought back from being held captive, her fiancÃ© being with another woman and thinking she's deadâ€¦ and then being a rank higher than she was, and Eagle Squadronâ€¦" Riko said as she named off things she had to worry about.

"Yeah, she needs to realize some people are trying to help her and not make it harder for her" Seth said.

"Seth, you're not going to be there right now to help her cope. You're going to another room remember?" Riko told him.

"Temporarily. Once she calms down and comes to talk to me, hopefully she'll figure out I didn't do anything wrong. I don't need to be snapped at for something I didn't do. Fuckâ€¦ I should have never gone near Aurora in the first placeâ€¦ wrong place at the wrong timeâ€¦" he grumbled to himself.

"If you weren't there, she might have beenâ€¦ wellâ€¦ forcedâ€¦" Riko told him quietly. The lift doors opened and he walked towards a waypoint Riko set up in his eye HUD. He checked the key code and opened the door. The room was sparse, with a bed, a locker, a dresser and a desk with terminal. There was a closet and a bathroom, but no nightstand like Elena had. The clock was built into the headboard of the bed.

He dropped his things down and swapped everything he needed for security.

"You're rightâ€¦ still, she had no right to think I'd betray her" he grumbled.

"I'm sure she'll see what she did wrong and come talk to you soon. You two seem to belong with each other" Riko chuckled.

"You could have fooled me with the way we act. Yin and Yang it seems" he growled as he checked his data pad. Files showed up of what Aaron needed help with, and he started reading through each quickly.

"You're just ironing out your problems. You haven't exactly gotten used to each other yet, in this regard at least. You're bound to have arguments, it's natural" Riko told him and giggled.

"Wish she'd realize she didn't have anything to argue aboutâ€¦ you know, I think I read somewhere that people act that way when they're trying to hide something similar?" he told her.

"Seth, this is Elena we're talking about, the very vision of loyalty? Besides, I have security footage that shows her doing nothing of the sort, and it's extremely doubtful she ever will" Riko told him.

"Fuck! Security footage! I forgot about that! Shit, I could just show it to Elena right now!" he bonked himself on the head.

"Do you want me to compile the footage for her? It might take a bit of coercing from Cherry, but it shouldn't be a problem" Riko asked.

"After, I want her to simmer for a bit with what happened. She should have looked at the rest of the evidence. Besides, gonna need your backup for whatever Aaron needs" he replied as he placed his sidearm under the pillow.

"Alright, but remember, it could burn you later" she replied.

"I know, but I don't think so unless something else decides to happen" he told her.

"True. Well, ready to jump to find out what Aaron is looking at?" Riko asked.

"Yeah, lemme get there first" he replied and got out of his new quarters. He locked the door and went straight to the lab and through the decontamination routines, and then stripped and got into the pod. Jenny shoved a chewable in his mouth, and then grabbed an electrolyte drink and he gulped it down quick. He ate an energy bar and the door closed. The fluid filled up as the electrodes on his head stayed stuck while it flowed by. He slowly lost direct consciousness and shot out in remote viewing.

"\_Alright, what's going on Aaron?" Seth asked.\_

"\_Found something extremely interesting. You'll never believe this" Aaron replied. He showed the senior viewer what he saw.\_

"\_Son of a bitchâ€¦ a shipyard?" Seth gawked as he jumped to Aaron's waypointâ€¦ just outside the galaxy's rim. Way outside the galaxy's rim to be more precise.\_

"\_No kidding right? Definitely not Forerunner. Matches materials of Precursors. It isn't functioning, but that could change very quickly" he replied. Seth was astonished.\_

"\_This has to be reported ASAP" he told Aaron.\_

"\_Wait, you should take a look inside. We need to gather more intel before we tattle tale" Aaron said.\_

"\_Right, full report. Alright" Seth sighed and they both headed to the shipyard.\_

\*\*[2210 hours, April 16\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth's pod opened up for the final time in the day. Both Aaron and he had been mapping the layout of the shipyard, with nothing alive seen inside. But as Aaron had said, it could change frighteningly quickly. What they had found was incredible. The thing was designed around what looked like an asteroid field pulled into orbit around it, but how they were staying there was anybody's guess. Seth figured there was a modified gravitational field pulling and pushing at the same time, almost like a vortex. The asteroids were mined by automated systems to produce materials for ship building, or fighters. From what they could deduce, if it went operational, it could pump out a fleet in a week.

Seth squinted as light poured in and hit his eyes. The ocular's dulled light intake quickly and he adjusted to see Jenny and the other nurses pull him out and place him in a wheelchair. They dried him off and threw some clothes on him quickly, which was odd.

"Someone is outside the DECON to see you" Jenny whispered. He thought Elena had come to her senses. He was more than ready to talk to her about what had happened now that she would have settled down and thought through things clearly. The shirt they threw on him wasn't exactly what he wanted to wear in front of her, as it said: Fart loading = 35 percent, please waitâ€|

They pushed him through the first door as he drank an electrolyte drink, and Jenny left him inside the room. Why were they doing that? Leaving him alone? More than likely so he could talk to Elena in private. The second pair of doors opened, and what he saw surprised him. Standing near the door, was Admiral Hood. And next to himâ€| was Aurora.

"Just the man we need to see. We need your help" Hood told him. Aurora smiled.

"Looks like we'll be working together Seth. I'm so glad" she giggled. Seth was really confused.

"Uh, whaâ€| huh? Send a mission request to my RMC not me. I'm a little busy right now" he told them.

"I was told by Metfield he'd allow this one time" Hood explained.

"Bullshit, he'd have called me in a heartbeat. Nice lie, but I do better" Seth growled. Hood sighed. It really was a lie.

"Agent Franklin, please. I'd rather keep this down low. Only mission



critical personnel for it. I'd rather no one else gets word specifically because of anyâ€¦| unrest" Hood told him.

"Unrest? You sure you're using the right word for it Admiral? Cause where I come from, it meansâ€¦| oh shit, you didn'tâ€¦| what the fuck did you hit?" Seth asked annoyed. Unrest meant someone fucked up and hit something they weren't supposed to or did something they weren't supposed to, and someone else had to come in and clean up the mistake so no one knew. Seth had done that a total of twice in the past for others, and he hated it each time.

"I swear, I didn't know daddy, I justâ€¦| how was I supposed to know he was an ambassador and he was right there?" Aurora pouted.

"Remember where we are Colonel. I am your commanding officer, remember that!" Admiral Hood glared at Aurora, but softened afterwards as she looked sad.

\_God, so sweet I'm going to puke from the toothache. Daddy is cleaning up after her little mistake.\_

"Who did you hit?" Seth snapped at her, curious as to what ambassador she was referring to.

"There was a high councilor being held below by the brutes. However, we believe the he'sâ€¦| caughtâ€¦| in a collapse from Aurora opening fire in the tunnels. He's most likely wounded, though definitely alive. If he finds a way out, he'll more than likely damage our relations with the Sangheili. Apparently, there were other high officials taken hostage as well, though Sangheili do not allow that and would rather die under normal circumstances, they're belief was that the councilor would find a way to escape with vital information. We need you to assist Colonel Shrike with finding himâ€¦| and somehow persuade him to not harm our relations" Hood told him.

"You mean mind control or put a bullet in his head. Can't help you, we don't work that way" he said and got out of his wheelchair.

"Please Seth? You wouldn't want everybody to get hurt because of a little mistake I made would you?" Aurora pouted and looked him in the eye.

\_How gullible do you think I am? I EAT SLEEP AND BREATHE THIS KIND OF THING GIRL! YOU BOTH SUCK AT THIS!\_

"How the fuck do you know if he understood who was attacking him?" Seth asked.

"He was near the entrance to the tunnel when Colonel Shrike opened up into it. There were multiple brutes hidden and two Grendel fighters ready for takeoff. He might have been trying to escape, but Colonel Shrike went a bitâ€¦| overboard and saturated the area" Hood said and looked at her.

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to make sure it was done right" she told him looking sad.

\_And he's going along with this because she's his daughter, despite

the fact she could start another fucking war. Nice. Family ties are strong indeed. You suck Hood. Your daughter nearly damned us all. I have enough to worry about without her mixing it up.\_

"Can you do it son?" Hood asked him.

"I don't do mind control Admiral. And I'm pretty sure friendlies will realize how he magically turned inside out from seemingly nowhere. Besides, don't you want the intel? Shit, leave it to you flying nut jobs to think up some half assed plan in espionage and expect us real spooks to make it work" Seth growled. Aurora looked hurt.

"Seth, please? I'm sorry. I screwed upâ€¦ please help me" she said softly, her seductive voice completely replaced with an innocent lilt.

\_Help me Obi-wan! You're my only hope! Fuck that, I die with a light saber through the chest if I do this and turn into a ghostly fart! No dying on my part!\_

"You expect me to make this work? Oh hell noâ€¦ you'd have to make it look like you were trying to protect him but the tunnel had problems on its own! They wouldn't make a base in there if it was seismically intensive!" he told her.

"Brutes haven't always been the smartest beings in the galaxy" Hood commented.

"That's a good idea!" Aurora smiled at him.

"I don't do earthquakes! Fuck! You expect me to magically do something to fix this whole thing don't you?" Seth asked.

"You do have a reputation for the impossible from what I did get from Metfield Seth" Admiral Hood told him. Seth looked at Aurora. She had her hands clasped in front of her and was still using the innocent look. He had no idea if she was just childish and hadn't grown up or was just playing everybody for her own gains. Hell, with a body like she had, he would have. For all he knew, she was being sincere in her worry. He needed to do a psych eval to figure out who she really was under the snobbish attitude.

\_Note to self: Bitchslap superior. He does not get the choice to whore me out to army monkeys. I don't care if he can make or break me, we don't do mistakes for military dickheads.\_

"Please? Can't we be friends? Help a friend out?" Aurora asked him, begging to him. He glowered at her and twitched his nose.

"Fine. I run the op. What I say goes, you don't even get to hiccup unless I say so got it?" he told them.

"I'll put the mission in your capable hands then. Colonel Shrike will work with you to fix this. Thank you Agent Franklin. You're doing something that may help stop a war before it beginsâ€¦ and give a father some relief" he told him and nodded to Aurora.

"Thank you Seth! I promise you won't regret this!" she said excitedly.

"I'm regretting it already" he grumbled under his breath.

(Author's Note: I have no idea what I wrote. I hope to god I don't have to retcon this later. For everyone's amusement, the marine dungeons and daggers scene was from the game "The Summoner" in an easter egg scene. Geeks will rule the world. If we can figure out how to cast magic missile. And Mordenkainen's magical watchdog. Aurora is actually developing more as a character than I expected in my head. After writing this, all sorts of ideas popped in. No, Seth and Elena are good, Seth and Aurora are bad. Not happening. Elena and no Seth um I'll get back to you.)

#### 14. Psych Work Up

\*\*[0700 hours, April 17\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Elena woke up one hour later than she normally did. She rolled over and felt the bed, and found no one else was there. She blinked groggily and realized Seth, for another night, was not with her. She sighed as her brain turned on and remembered he had moved out and what she had said. She still didn't have the guts to confront him and tell him she was sorry. She didn't know if the rumors were true or not, but it wasn't like his word was lower than everyone else's. He told her he didn't do anything, and she should have trusted him.

She took a deep breath and got out of bed to take a shower and get ready for the day. She would first go tell Seth she was sorry and start the day off to a good start once she had some food in her system. Hopefully he'd forgive her. She somehow knew he would, but she was still nervous with her decision.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Seth woke up to a rude ring of his door alarm. He opened his eyes quickly and rolled them around, looking for the offending sound and once he found it, he would kill it. He was grumpy from what he had done last night, and didn't really have a want for visitors. He got up as another ring of his door alarm made him growl. He walked to the door, and then looked down at himself. He was standing there in just his boxer briefs. He turned around and grabbed his pants and put them on quickly, and then opened the door. Aurora.

"Oh, wow, you're for me?" she asked sweetly, looking at his toned body.

"What do you want?" he grumbled.

"Oh, don't be that way, please? We can be friends. Or more if you want. I feel just terrible that you're not with your girlfriend. So sad. I didn't mean to ruin things with you and her, but now you know how she acts. Loyalty is an admirable trait" she pouted at first, but then changed to flirtatious immediately after. Seth took a deep breath. He was rethinking killing the offending sound again. The thought of his fist comically shooting towards Aurora's face and stopping her from speaking floated through his mind before closing the door.

"But that's not why I'm here. I'll hopefully get a chance to know more about you later. I'd like to start with how we can fix what we talked about last night?" she asked. Seth shook his head and grumbled something incomprehensible.

"What was that? I'm sorry, did I wake you? I know you're a civilian, but we're usually up this time of day. I was hoping you'd be ok with itâ€¦| aren't you?" she asked innocently.

\_No, I'm not, but whatever, this gets done quickly so I can have you  
LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!\_

"Fine. Let me get ready" he told her.

"Oh, could I come in? I don't really want to sit outside" she pouted.

\_Don't evenâ€¦| you do this, and you might cause more bullshit for you.\_

"Fine, don't touch anything" he growled.

"Girl Scout's honor!" she said with two fingers saluting him. She walked in and sat down on his bed as he grabbed new clothes and went into the bathroom. She tried to peek in as he stripped and he quickly closed the door.

\_No ass for joo.\_

He quickly took a shower and got his clothes on and walked out of the bathroom, and then instinctively sat down on the bed to put his shoes on. He realized it was a mistake as he sat next to her. She kept her gaze fixed on him, the entire time smiling.

"It must be difficult, being apart from your loved one when she's the one who pushed you to this" she told him softly.

"Not listening" he told her as he tied the last lace.

"She yelled at you I'm guessing? I'm sorry I caused that. I really feel awful about it. Butâ€¦| maybe it gives you time to think you know? Someone does that, you just get the chance to find someone who might understand you? See the uniqueness in you? I'd never yell at you. I know you're loyal" she told him.

"Again, not listening" he told her as he picked up his personal data pad. He made sure his bone mic was securely in his ear and grabbed his spare data pad as well.

"Leos are like that. We stick to one thing and never let go. She never gave you a chance to really talk. I never got a chance to really talk to you. Won't you give me one?" she asked hopefully.

"No comprende estúpido" he mumbled.

"Please? I like you, is that what you want me to say? I don't know, I just-" she started to say as she looked away, and as soon as she looked back at him and was going to continue, she met his glare. It made Elena's daggers look like nothing compared to his death gaze. It suddenly softened as he suddenly got a light bulb idea.

\_What time is it? Psychology time Doctor Phil! Let's see what make this such a problem shall we?\_

"Aurora, would you per chance explain to me WHY you like me?" he said.

\_Psych Eval. Never gets old. Lemme guess, mommie not love you enough? Daddy set too many rules? Tutor molest you when you were younger? Let it all out, I'm listening. Hmm, yes, very interesting. Tell me more.\_

"Well, despite how you try and hide it, you're fun to be around. I know how to find them. And you're strong hearted, you're hansom, you're definitely smart if you do what you do right? Andâ€¦ I don't knowâ€¦ I feel a connection to you" she told him.

"Then why do you act the way you do?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" she asked smiling, not getting what he was saying.

"You're attitude towards others, your personality. What brought you to act the way you do? What's your view of people around you and life in general?" he asked.

\_Where is my fucking crystal recorder? I should document this.\_

"What? Well, I don't understand, you want me to tell about my life? Oh Seth, I'll tell you anything you want!" She said excitedly and Seth sat down next to her again. She leaned against him but he pushed her aside gently and told her to lay down on the bed. She complied quickly and almost cuddled his sheets. He found that particularly creepy as she smelled them too.

"Now, tell me about when you were a kid. How were you brought up?" he asked.

"Well, I grew up in London, and my mother pretty much got a tutor to teach me whatever I needed to learn, and there were plenty of servants to care for me" she told him as she tried to keep her eyes fixated on him.

"So, servants watched over you? You never went to a public school?" he asked her calmly.

"Well, yeah, my mother was really busy all the time. I understood. I'd grow up eventually to do the same right? I mean, she's practically a princess, and that would mean I am too. I don't do public school, I had tutors silly" she giggled.

"What makes you think you're a princess?" he asked.

"Well, my father was knighted, and became a Lord soon after, soâ€¦ heritage? I could see myself being royalty when I was a little girl, with my prince wherever he was" she said and giggled at him.

"Did you think there was a prince out there for you when you were that young? Did you know any boys at that age?" he asked.

"There had to be! I mean, my father is a Duke! I justâ€¦ I dreamed of him finding me, and falling in love at first sight" she told him and winked.

"Please, continue. Were there any boys you knew when you were younger?" he asked.

"Well, there was one. I think he was the son of one of the servants. He was a bit of a bully" she frowned.

"Did he berate you? Hit you?" he asked.

"He was meanâ€¦ he said a lot of things to meâ€¦ he tried to order me around! And when I wouldn't, he'd call me a whinerâ€¦ I'm not a whinerâ€¦ I'm notâ€¦" she pouted. He cocked his eyebrow briefly and looked around his room. Still no sight of the crystal recorder.

"Did he ever get reprimanded?" he asked.

"His mother was reprimanded for him treating me as such. She should have kept him under control better in my house. I didn't like how he treated me. I don't like when people think I'm weak" she told him as she started to look at the ceiling.

"Do you feel weak?" he asked.

"No! I'm not weak! He was mean to meâ€¦ he said I'd never get my prince if I was weakâ€¦ so I told my motherâ€¦ she just told me to ignore him because he was nothingâ€¦ and then told me to stop bothering herâ€¦" she told him as she stared at the ceiling now.

"Bothering her? Did she think you were a bother?" he asked.

"I don't know! Iâ€¦ I'm not a bother!... am I?" she asked him and looked down her chest at him.

"Only you can answer that for yourself. Back to the ignoring. So you ignored him" he said.

"Yes, I ignored him. I ignore anybody who says bad things to me. It's not right to say those things to people" she told him.

"Do you ignore military officials now if they say something bad?" he asked.

"No! They're my superiors! I'd never stop listening to them!" she scoffed and told him confused.

"Alright. Back to your past. So you ignored when someone says mean things. You learned this. Did you ever think maybe they were telling the truth at times?" he asked. Crack shot question.

"Iâ€¦" she hesitated.

"Answer in your own time, think carefully" he said calmly.

"I don't like being thought of as weak. I try and try to show I'm notâ€¦ but I never get the responses I was expectingâ€¦ I never got

noticed by others" she said and he could hear her literally opening up. Good.

"Not even by your own mother?" he asked.

"She didn't really have much time to notice me with her duties daddy was gone a lot so he didn't spend a lot of time with us so she divorced him because he stopped coming home for a long time" she told him. Sounded like Elena with her father.

"But she spent time with you? No?" he asked.

"No. The servants and tutors watched me my mother kept saying the weak have those jobs they listen to us but I think I was just like them because she didn't look at either of us" Aurora said and he could see tears building.

"So, you feel inferior but don't want to be considered as such? So you fight to be superior? How do you fight to be this way?" he asked.

"I prove I can outgun anyone and be better than anyone else. I don't want to be second place. I'm not going to be second at all" she told him.

"Do you feel second to Brigadier General Gripen?" he asked.

"Yes. No. I'm not second to her, she's second to me. I'm better! I am!" she said and looked at him.

"Aren't I?" she asked worriedly.

"I can't answer that for you. You have to answer that yourself. Did you prove you were capable to your mother?" he asked.

"No I didn't think I was" she said as her voice got slightly scratchy.

"Do you believe others aren't capable? Even though they are your peers?" he asked.

"Yes! They aren't as good as I am! I made it to Colonel beyond them!" she hesitated again.

"But you treat them like that boy treated you, like you were nothing. Don't you think that's wrong?" he asked.

"They're weaker than I am!" she snapped at him.

"How do you know? You aren't them. Why would you treat someone like you have been treated?" he asked.

\_Confuscius say: Do unto others, as you wish done unto you.\_

"I don't know. I don't want to be lower than they are" she said.

"Because you're worried you're weak. You don't want to be weak. So you fight to not be, and you do this by treating others like so. And you ignore things that you don't agree with, unless they are orders.

And you believe there is a prince out there that is like in the fairy tales that would want you for that" he said. She sat up and looked at him.

\_Cast down your weight sinner! And praise your savior for your epiphany of light! Hallelujah!\_

"I don't understand. What am I doing? Am I doing something wrong?" she asked worriedly.

"Here, we're going to try something to see what you feel about what you did when you were younger. Then you can figure out if you did something wrong. We're going to do hypnosis, are you alright with that?" he asked.

"Wait, you're going to hypnotize me? Aren't we going to start figuring out how to fix what I did?" she asked, but she wasn't being seductive anymore. She sounded slightly different.

\_Sounds like her brain might have actually turned on. Good. I'm making progress.\_

"We will, after this. Now, lay back down" he said and pushed her gently down on the bed. She giggled at his touch and gazed at him.

"Now, calmly cleanse your mind of everything. Let it run blank. Close your eyes. Think of nothing. Just listen to my voice" he told her quietly.

"I'm going to count down from one hundred, and when I reach zero, you're going to be resting peacefully and thinking of nothing but my voice" he told her softly. She giggled as he said it and he counted down. Every seven number or three number, he reminded her she was getting even more tired. He tapped his foot on the ground lightly for every number he counted.

When he finally reached zero, she was fast asleep.

"Now, imagine you're floating in water, a warm ocean. Nothing around. Not a care. Everything is peaceful. The water is a crystal clear blue. You can hear the waves as you float. The water slowly engulfs you, and you feel the water envelope your whole body. You can breathe. Nothing will harm you" he told her, further pushing her into hypnosis.

"Now, remember what we have talked about. Move to those times when you learned to do those things. Move to when you were scared you were weak" he told her softly.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

Aurora woke up as Seth snapped his fingers. She sat up and looked astonished, and then at him.

"Iâ€| oh my godâ€| I am so sorry" she told him earnestly.

\_Ding. Turkey's done.\_

"Sorry about what?" he asked her.



"Aboutâ€¦ not listening to you. I justâ€¦ I'mâ€¦ Iâ€¦" she started to cry.

"Calm down. Calm. Take a deep breath" he told her softly as she sobbed.

"I just thought, I justâ€¦ I really like you, and sheâ€¦ I figured if I proved I couldâ€¦ waahhhhh" she cried and leaned against him.

\_My job is done. I made a grown woman cry. Umâ€¦ maybe I should have rethought thisâ€¦ Wait, then she still tries to wreck shit with Elenaâ€¦ nevermind, this was a good ideaâ€¦ you're thinking nowâ€¦\_

"I'm with someone. You don't do that right?" he asked.

"No" she choked out and cried even more.

"So you find someone who likes you right? Because you're confident and capable right? Because no one can tell you you're weak if you strive to not be right? How many people, your peers, say you're capable right now?" he asked.

"All of them" she choked out.

"So you're not inferior. And you see them helping you not be as such right?" he asked.

"Yeah" she responded and looked at him.

"So what is Elena?" he asked.

"Your girlfriend" she choked out, but she didn't like saying it.

"And you are?" he asked.

"Not" she cried. That hurt more, but he needed her to say it.

"But what are you instead?" he asked.

"Huh?" she asked, confused but still crying.

"Think, think clearly. I am not yelling at you. I am not calling you names. I am not hurting you. I am helping you right? So what am I normally considered if I'm taking the time to help you?" he asked.

"Aâ€¦ friend?" she asked. She seemed to wonder why he was treating her like a little girl.

"Exactly. We can be friends, but no more acting like you did before. You see how it makes people feel? You don't want others to feel that way do you? You felt that way, and you don't want to feel that way ever again right?" he asked.

"Mmmhmmm" she said and sniffled. She wiped her eyes and looked at him. It was like talking to a child, as he had to speak in small words most of the time for her to understand. If she was a pilot, she

was definitely competent, but he wondered if her brain was still stuck in little girl mode now that he played with it. Maybe she just had to come to terms with how her life worked. She wasn't screwed with when she was younger like Sarah was, but she was brought up wrong with no family actually taking care of her. She was alone.

"Bingo. So?" he asked.

"I want to be friends with youâ€¦ butâ€¦" she hesitated.

"But?" he asked confused.

"I really do like you. She doesn't see it. I do. You're so much more different than others. You fight and fight and fight for something, but I don't know what it is. You keep trying to fix everything, and you never want to take credit for what you did. You're always there for people it seems. You never want to be noticed for all the good you do. I'm sorry, I know you want me to stop, but I'm just telling you! So please listen this time!" she told him earnestly. She cupped his face with her hands and stared at him, wanting him to listen to her.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry for how I acted! I swear I am! Iâ€¦ I just like you! You are a prince you just don't see it!... You deserve more than what you get right now. I don't care if you disagree, I see it. Iâ€¦ I want to be with you, but I know I can't. At leastâ€¦ right now. If she ever leaves you, I'll be waiting right there for you. I hope she treats you better. She doesn't understand you. Iâ€¦ I don't even think I understand you really. That's why you're so interesting! Soâ€¦ I hope she tells you what you need to hear, because if she won't, I sure as hell will!" she told him.

"Aurora, stop, you don't know what-" he started.

"You deserve more than I could give, and Elena would be foolish to say anything but the same! The fact that you still love her even with you being here proves that! She should understand that too!" she told him. He sat there silent. He did psych evaluations on everyone, and never once did he have someone try to do one on him. He thought she was just spewing her emotions all at once, and some of it was confusing, but he wondered if she was right. He'd have to think.

"Alright, fine. Let's get you cleaned up. We're done, don't worry, you're worth it now. Don't ever let anyone say otherwise ok?" he told her as he grabbed a small hand towel that was brand new and clean and wiped her cheeks.

"I still want to be better than everyone, I don't think you can change that" she told him.

"You know, there's a line. Great leaders surround themselves with people who are better than themselves" he told her.

"You want to be better? Do what Elena does. And hell, maybe you don't have to be better. Think. You don't want to be lower, and yet you just said you don't want to look down on others. So equal? You want to be equal to Elena?" he asked.

"Iâ€ guess" she said as she sniffled still.

"Alright. So equal. Fine. Work to do what she does. Yes, you're a Colonel. Lift your squadron up. She did it, and she has a band of misfits for crying out loud. Be awesome by doing awesome, and do it with others who are awesome. They can't be awesome if you don't help them do it. I have no idea what I just saidâ€ but it seemed like a good idea to explain" he told her.

"Thank you" she said and hugged him quickly.

\_Babysitting has its rewards. Kid might actually do ok. Please oh please don't tell anyone this or I swear I will deny it and put a snake in your bed when you least expect itâ€|\_

"Alright. You good? You ready to be a Colonel now? No more boy searching, I clearly saw how they come to you. Hell, look at how Elena does it. She was engaged, and had a Commander like her, and I'm here! Well, now the fiancÃ© is married to someone else and Aldric likes Sarah, but I'm still here! So yeahâ€ wow, that sounded better in my headâ€" he told her, and then looked off towards the wall wondering what he said.

"So, I'm wonderingâ€" she almost whispered as she pulled away.

"No, I thought we just said-" he started to say sternly.

"No, I know I know, I justâ€ if she doesn'tâ€ forgive youâ€ would you at least consider me?" she asked meekly.

"Iâ€ whaâ€ uhâ€ she'd have to dump me. But if she doesâ€ okâ€ but look at Aldric! He moved on quick! He found Sarah! And frankly? She's strong too! She just doesn't see it! She's incredible! I've seen her flying around with things on her tail and she just boom boom boom, gone! Just watch, you'll find someone just like he did. Someone right up there with your epic scale, no worries. Hey. You'll be fine" he told her and poked her shoulder. She giggled and poked him back.

"Blah!" he grunted and flopped on the bed, playing dead. She laughed at him as he sat back up.

"Ok, soâ€ I'm at that awkward silent moment where I don't have any other advice to give youâ€ and I'm sorry, but I have to peeâ€" he told her and got up to go to the bathroom. She laughed and nodded. He closed the door as she tried to peek again.

\_No ass for joo. Get ass from someone else. Lord knows they're out there ready to moon you if you asked for it girl.\_

He flushed the toilet and opened the door. She just sat there smiling.

"Ready to help a friend figure out how to not crash her career?" she asked nicely.

"Yeah, actually, I've been thinking about that now that you brought it up. I'll explain my thoughts while we get something to eat. I'm starved" he told her. She giggled and nodded.

"Sure thing" she said still smiling. She got up and they both walked out of his quarters.

"So I figure with the saturation he might not have seen you very well through the explosions and the debris, but I wonder if he might have just thought-" he started as he gestured through the air to Aurora as she listened intently, not ignoring him at all. She literally was taking notes in her mind.

What they both saw after wasn't a good thing. Elena was standing there in the hallway, watching them leave his quarters.

"Hey" he said, and noticed the look on her face. She was in shock. Aurora and Seth were just talking and smiling to each other. Seth looked between Aurora and Elena, and then just stood there.

"Hey, nothing was-" he started and she put her hand up to stop him.

"I hope you two are happy together" she said simply. Seth was dumbstruck.

"Wait! No! it's not what you think!" he told her. She walked away quickly as tears built up in her eyes.

"No seriously! It isn't!" he told her and ran after her. She got to the bridge and told the guards to stop him from entering. As he tried to go in, both marines stood there.

"I just explained everything to her! It's all good! Elena!" he yelled. No response.

"FUCK!" he yelled and turned around a few times.

"Tell her I need to talk to her, it's important. I'm helping with another project, and that's why she saw what she saw" he told them.

"Sir, she'll talk to you when she feels she's ready. You don't rush a General" they told him.

"Oh come on! I have a higher rank than you do! You will let me in!" he growled.

"Sir, no you don't, you're a civilian" one said.

"Oh fuck that, you think I'm lower? Guess what, I've been hiding it, but I'm tired and stressed right now! I'm a verified four star general, authentication-" he started.

"Tell that to someone who cares. You're a civilian to us sir. Move along please" they told him.

"Is the whole fucking military like you guys? Fuck! And people think us spooks are fucked up!" he barked.

"Sir, leave" the guard said. Seth stormed off towards the lab. Aurora was following him.

"I'm sorry" she whispered.

"Don't be, you didn't do anything wrong here. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I cannot believe her, just jumping to conclusions, saying what she thinks is wrong and justâ€¦ fuck!" he growled as he went to the DFAC. She followed quickly at his heels as he grabbed a heaping tray and scarfed it down quickly at the middle table. Aurora just sat there looking at him worried.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" she started again.

"Don't! Not your fault. She saw what she thought she saw, she jumped to conclusions. Riko, you there?" he asked to the air. Aurora looked at him funny, but he pointed to his ear.

"I'm here Seth, need something?" she asked.

"Yeah. Get the video footage from that previous time and the footage in my quarters. I don't care if you have to intimidate Cherry to get it and have Tachi and Cortana back you up. If you have to, get in touch with you know who back at base" Seth said. Riko knew who he was talking about. There was word of a 4th generation espionage AI that was around by the name of Serin. She never showed up, and never talked, but she did have an avatar. The only one who has seen her was Metfield. She could pull apart Cortana, Tachi, and Parangosky's replacement, Osman's pet AI BB at the same time in a heartbeat. She just never worked with Seth, yet. She had far worse things she had to do. She was a defense against any intrusions from Forerunner AIs or even Precursors. She did know of Seth, however.

"I'll do what I can" she told him. Aurora just looked at him.

"Tachi, get me coms to Dmitry. Elena can growl all she wants, I still have a job to do. I'll find her once she goes to her quarters again" he said.

"No problem. Is this a cooperative assignment?" Tachi asked.

"Sort of. I need him to do this. He owes me" Seth replied.

"Dmitry here, ah Seth. Do you need something?" he asked over his coms.

"DFAC. ASAP" he told him.

"I'll be there soon" Dmitry chuckled. Aurora just sat there.

"He'll help us" he responded.

"Thanks" she replied and reached across the table to squeeze his hand. He actually let her. Ten minutes later, Dmitry walked in.

"So, you have a problem?" he asked smiling.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

Dmitry nodded.

"Alright, so, you understand? We're going to put multiple thumpers burrowed around here, which Aurora will drop. You'll enter here, much

further down. This will explain the damage around the area, and that Aurora was not in fact the reason he was nearly killed, but the tunnel collapsed on its own. The thumpers will give just enough seismic activity to make it look like the tunnel is still unstable, but in fact it's perfectly safe. Now, you will enter, with a GRID escort. I'd rather not have Spartans due to their need in the cities. Covert, down low. No one finds out about this ok?" Seth told him just outside his quarters as Aurora stood there. She was amazed with the plan.

Seth had figured out how to get the councilor out with detailed information as well as make it look like humans did not in fact try and kill him, but tried to save him and the tunnel collapsed before they could reach him.

"Alright, I'll go select the guards from our stock" he told him. Dmitry walked off towards the crew quarters, as GRID had some of their own troops to protect the lab. They never went anywhere without some of their own forces nearby.

"You need to get to your fighter" Seth told Aurora.

"Iâ€| alright. But, if Elena doesn't come aroundâ€| from the footageâ€| remember what I saidâ€| alright?" she asked. He sighed. If Elena didn't see the light and apologize and forgive him, then things might turn out differently between them.

\*\*[2100 hours, April 17\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth was in his pod waiting. Aurora slipped out of the Infinity in her Falcata effortlessly, and the mission was she was running patrol near some mountains to allow a pelican to land with some troops for a geological survey. Dmitry was with twelve other GRID ODSs inside the GRID pelican as they swooped down behind Aurora's fighter. They continued down into the night and finally reached the area.

"\_Alright, Aurora, do it" Seth said.\_

"That's incredible Seth, I can really hear you even though you're not hereâ€| like you're near meâ€|" she said enthusiastically.

"\_Aurora, focus. This is what I do. Thumpers please" he replied.\_

"Right. Sorry. Pods opened, dropping thumper mines" she replied. Her fighter slipped over the mountain range and opened up its mine pod in the back, dropping small column like objects towards the area. Seth watched the surroundings and zipped through the tunnels to find the councilor. He was moving, slowly and injured, but he was alive. He wasn't wearing armor, but he did have an assortment of brute weapons carried with him.

"\_Dmitry, he's armed, careful when you go in" Seth told them.\_

"Understood. Is everything ready?" Dmitry asked.

"Thumpers are dropped like you asked Seth. Start them up?" she

asked.

"\_No, I'll do it, carefully. Keep an eye on anything unusual, keep your sensors maxed to find any stress points. I'd rather not miss something and find the place collapsing on them when they go in" Seth told her.\_

"You'd miss something? Doubtful" she chuckled.

"\_You'd be surprised. I'm not omniscient. Alright, Dmitry, enter" he told them.\_

"Copy. Going in" Dmitry said as the GRID soldiers followed. They moved through the dark tunnels quickly, searching with night vision, infrared, and low light systems. They continued down the tunnels checking their corners, looking for brutes as well as the councilor. An hour went by, followed by another. Seth carefully set off some thumpers as the tunnels behind the councilor collapsed. The councilor moved quicker, but he was still injured.

"\_He's heading your way. Call out" Seth said.\_

"Councilor Seg'Youmee! This is a rescue operation coming to retrieve you! Do you have honor to show yourself and turn your capture into glory with revenge?" Dmitry said. He'd studied some of Sangheili culture. They abhorred being taken captive. It was incredibly shameful. They would rather die than be a prisoner. The only way they would stay alive would be if they still had something of worth to bring back to redeem their honor.

"I am here human! I will gain my glory and honor back!" Seg said.

"Then join us in heading to the surface and regain your honor!" Dmitry said from his helmet.

"I will. I have much to tell" he said and sat down for the medic to come up.

"Do not touch me doctor. I do not need your help. I will survive" he growled.

"There is no honor in dying before you can help Councilor. This doctor is not the one who is shedding your blood. He is stopping you from shedding it, and keeping your honor in you" Dmitry said. Seg looked at the medic as he sat there.

"Alright. I agree" he replied finally. The medic bandaged him up and pushed a biofoam canister into the wound in his thigh. He roared from the pain, but let it happen.

"That will stop your honor from shedding. Now he will inject something to seal your bones together so you can walk with strength and pride" Dmitry told him.

"You seem to understand our honor human. I doubt you know of our whole culture however" Seg told him.

"We're allies Councilor. We're trying to learn from each other as well as work towards a far better future. It is in our best interest

to try and know what your culture is about, as you for us" Dmitry explained.

"Hmmm, there is truth in your words" he growled. Seg got up and flexed his leg as the medic backed up.

"Come, we should get you out of here" Dmitry said and escorted the Councilor up.

"I was attacked by your fighters before this whole thing happened" Seg told them.

"You must be mistaken, they were trying to thin out the ranks around you to get nearby, but the tunnels collapsed. They are unstable" Dmitry told him.

"These tunnels are stable! I have lived here my whole life! I have never seen them-" Seg started to say just as another seismic event happened from Seth setting off thumpers.

"Maybe the battle has woken up an underground volcano? You never know Councilor. Our home world had a forerunner gate on it and we never knew it existed. Can you say something unknown to you isn't happening below?" he asked. Seg growled.

"I could not, no. Soâ€¦ your fighters were not trying to kill me?" he asked.

"They were clearing the area to send in ground forces. We don't have anything to gain from attacking an ally Councilor" Dmitry chuckled.

"Indeed. Very well, let us leave quickly. I am anxious to explain what I have seen" he said.

The escort took another two hours coming back up.

"\_Seth" Aaron suddenly said.\_

"\_Yo, what are you doing up so late?" Seth chuckled.\_

"\_I've been checking on the shipyard we've been playing with. It still isn't active, and I've found other things. I thinkâ€¦ I think there's an activation panel somewhere" Aaron told him.\_

"\_Where?" Seth asked.\_

"\_You'll never believe me. The signal request? I don't know if it is a signal request, but it's coming from the planet you're at" Aaron told him. Seth was stunned.\_

"So are we done Seth?" Aurora asked.

"\_Uh, hang on" he replied.\_

"\_Where did you find the signal request originating from?" he asked Aaron.\_

"\_Deep, really deep. I have no idea where the hell deep, but just deep. Want me to come with you?" he asked.\_



"\_Yeah, two minds in these tunnels would help. Shitâ€¦ I wonderâ€¦" Seth whispered.\_

"\_What's wrong?" Aaron asked.\_

"\_Tachi, do we have topography scans and underground mapping?" he asked.\_

"Bringing the wire frame up now" Tachi replied.

Seth looked over the map.

"\_And no one bothered to tell us thisâ€¦ greatâ€¦ welp, the Elites have been forgetting to tell us some critical bullshit about their fucking planet. There's a god damn MacAllen Network under the crust" Seth told him.\_

"\_No way. Are you serious?" Aaron asked astonished.\_

A MacAllen Network was a web of underground tunnels completely covering the planet. Some have water flowing through them, others magma, but a good portion would not have anything, and could in fact have indigenous life living in them.

"\_Alright, let's check this out. Tachi, keep an and eye on the signal request, let us know if we get close to where the basic spot is. I know we don't have the right position right now, but I'd like to know if the signal request turns into a signal ping. If it does that, we might have a problem" Seth said.\_

"Hotterâ€¦ hotterâ€¦ colderâ€¦" Tachi commented.

"\_Oh god, don't give me that bullshit. Triangulate it for crying out loud. Give me an area to go to so we can search" Seth growled.\_

"You could have just asked for that" Tachi chuckled.

"\_Bite me. Where is it?" he asked. An aura beacon popped up for him to move into to check out. The area was 100 square miles of spherical space.\_

"\_Alright, I'll search left, you search right, deal?" Seth sighed out.\_

"\_Gotcha" Aaron chuckled.\_

\*\*[Three hours later]\*\*

The councilor was brought up to the ships and explained what he had seen. He could barely see what it was, but he did in fact know it was some sort of panel. A control panel hidden deep inside a cavern, beyond where he could reach. He barely could even it see it, it was that deep underground from where he was. Everyone was worried immediately. All marines were put on alert and Spartans were ready.

Elena walked down a hallway as Seth had just left the lab and was searching for her.

"Elena! Elena!" he yelled.

"Surprised you're not with your new girlfriend" she growled as she continued walking.

"It's not what you think! Will you listen to me?" he asked and grabbed her arm. She pulled away immediately.

"I know what you said, and I know what I saw! You said she didn't mean anything! You said nothing happened! I was coming to apologize for what I said, and I see her leaving your quarters? What, did you sleep together? Is this some thing you do with each girl you like? Get into their panties? So I'm used up because I wouldn't have sex with you that one night?" she yelled at him.

"No! I told her I wasn't interested! Look, she's not chasing me anymore!" he told her.

"Yeah, obviously, because she has you! Leave me the hell alone! We're done! We might work together, but I hope to god that changes soon! I trusted you!" she yelled at him with a hurt look in her eyes.

"I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" he roared at her.

"You could have fooled me" she said softly.

"Talk to her then! She'll prove it! There's also-" Seth tried to say but the alarms suddenly went off. Elena looked around and suddenly ran to the bridge as Seth went with her.

"Sitrep" she requested.

"Portals detected. It's Precursor" Dare told her.

"Shit, I don't have a fighter" she whispered.

"Get your squadrons out there now" Dare told her.

"I know I know!" she growled.

"Seth, can you-" Dare asked him.

"I'm running on low here, gimme a sec" he said as he panted and held his chest

"We don't have a sec! Any help you can give would be appreciated!" Dare told him. He leaned against the wall. His heart arrhythmias were acting up. Elena even noticed it.

"I don't think it's gonna happen. I... I'll do what I can though" he panted as he went back. He glanced at Elena who scowled at him and quickly turned around. She didn't even care if he collapsed right there and then. He was hurt about that. Was she really done with him? He continued out of the bridge and towards the lab again.

"You're not getting back in, not in your condition" Jenny told him.

"I have to" he told her.

"Screw it, and how do you intend to make it in? I'm not helping you, Dr. Montez isn't. We're standing right here. Figure out how to handle the pod on your own. You need rest Seth. Tomorrow you can do whatever you need to" she told him.

"The ship is under attack!" he told her.

"Alarms are going off, but they're out there fighting! As long as there are ships between us, we'll be fine!" Jenny said. She really had no idea about war. They didn't care if they were civilians, they'll kill them all.

"God damn it! Is everybody turning against me now? I need to get out there!" he growled.

"If you do, you'll die, and you'll never get a chance to fix things with Elena. Do you want to take that risk? They've fought out there before, they can handle it, you need to trust them" Jenny told him. He sighed and smashed his fist against the wall and nodded.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

"Hostiles right!" Roberts reported as Raven Squadron shot out of the Conundrum.

"I've got locks on twenty fighters, two destroyers!" Aldric reported after.

"Alright, we handle the fighters, let the battleships get their hits in on the destroyers! We-" Falken started. They saw Eagle Squadron in the distance. They were closing on the Precursor fighter craft.

"We have to make sure they don't get all the glory people! Get to it!" Falken barked. She actually got a response from the rest of the squadron. They shot after different fighters as Jones's squadron headed off alongside another. The battle was long and gruesome, as they lost Cougar Squadron down to the last man. Four frigates were lost, two being human and one cruiser completely shredded to pieces. Elena closed her eyes for a time for each kill that the enemy made. She mentally remembered who was lost, the name of each ship. Escape pods shot out of most of them, and the Precursors were being kept from taking them out, but it was still sad to see the ships in their death throws of explosions and fires.

**\*\*[Music: Two Steppes From Hell - Invincible]\*\***

"God damn it!" Elena gritted her teeth.

"You'll get your chance, trust me" Dare told her. What they next saw was incredible.

"One of the destroyers is down! Hell yeah!" Dariah cheered as the rest of the bridge watched Heavy 2-2 bring to bear its full assault, pouring everything it had into the damaged shields of one of the Precursor capital ships. It turned around and continued firing its smaller guns at the second destroyer, and it fired its torpedoes at the battleship. Heavy 2-2 did its best to dodge, but a few hit. The shields flared as it was a battle of the titans, with its own torpedoes firing back. It was trading fire, and taking on a

surprising amount of firepower for its shields. Everyone expected the shields to fail already, but Heavy 2-2 was taking the blows and dishing them out. It really was living up to its class, and wasn't going down without one hell of a fight, if at all with the damage it seemed to be taking.

"Fuck yeah, you do it Heavy 2-2!" Aldric chuckled as the ship literally looked offended at the attacks dealt towards it and returned fire with its four heavy stream lasers coming from its nacelles. Everyone could tell Heavy 2-2s crew was pissed.

"Let's show these bastards what we're made of" everyone heard over the coms, the only response they had heard from the ship ever. The battleship turned around and fired its side cannons as the destroyer fired five beams right at it. The beams slammed into the front shields of the battleship and were absorbed with a flash of blinding light, as it charged up its particle accelerator and fired right back, returning the favor. No one knew just how scary Heavy 2-2 really was until now, and it was living up to its namesake. The beam punched through the shields as the side cannons continued firing, and the destroyed tried to veer off and escape.

"It's trying to back off! We nearly have it!" Jacobs yelled as everyone fired what they could nearby as the battleship continued unleashing what it had available. The rounds punched through armor quickly, but did little to slow it from running. It activated its portal system and shot out, and the fighters retreated. Of the twenty fighters that were there, seventeen made it out. Three were destroyed, but at a cost. Cougar Squadron was wiped out, as was Diamond Back Squadron. Neither belonged to the Conundrum, but it was still felt by all.

"Those bastards only show up when there's something here! Wonderful! Now we have to send people down there to figure out what the fuck is going on!" Dare growled.

"We just have to be careful this time. No fooling with things at all" Elena said.

"Yeah, no kidding right? We don't want a repeat" Dare commented. Elena sighed as she saw the small list of Cougar Squadron on Dariah's screen. It was all red. She knew some of the pilots in that squadron. She sighed. They didn't deserve to go out like that. Eighteen Super Long Sword IIs, all gone. Her wings were lucky. Two fighters damaged, no losses. She was training them, with Falken's assistance somewhat. Falken was being held on a leash, but also was keeping the sims going for the other squadrons. Elena agreed the pilots needed to know what to expect, but not from brutes; Precursor training was needed.

"I'm going to head to the hangar and get a personal report from Raven Squadron" Elena told Dare. She nodded in response as the General walked out of the bridge and to the lift. She lowered down to the deck and walked out, and saw Seth leaning against the wall near the lab.

"I didn't do anything alright? What do I have to do to prove that? Tell me? Truly" he asked.

"Bring evidence that can refute what I've seen damn it. You bring that, and I will beg forgiveness at your feet, but from what I've

seen, I doubt it. Just leave me alone please, I have to check on my pilots" she told him. She walked by as he just watched her.

"We know why they're here by the way" Seth suddenly said. Elena stopped in her tracks.

"Who?" she asked, not turning around.

"The Precursors. Aaron and I found something beyond the galaxy, somewhere you guys couldn't obviously find" he said. Elena just stood there thinking.

"And what exactly did you find?" she asked.

"I can't tell you yet. We're still figuring it out, but from what we can tell you, a signal request was sent from it to this planet that might have told the Precursors something was here. We're still looking for it" he told her.

"Then find it quick or stop wasting my time" she told him.

"The planet is a big fucking place! If you can figure out a quicker path, let me know!" he growled.

"Are you done? I've got more important things to do than listen to you snap at people" she said and continued on. Seth gawked. She just couldn't get it in her head. He'd show her. He'd find the beacon and figure out just how it works.

Tachi had a theory that if they could get it to work beyond the standby signal, that they could upload their own operating systems and control the shipyard, maybe even move it into the galaxy to start pumping out advanced ships under UNSC control. If they couldn't, they could always destroy the thing and rip apart the shipyard. That task seemed daunting, however, as Aaron and Seth both understood the shipyard made Installation 00, The Ark, look small. They realized there had to have been a reason for it to be outside the galaxy, as its size might have thrown off gravitic problems to nearby sectors. The damn thing was the size of a solar system from what they saw.

He shook his head and watched her leave. She wasn't the same when she was angry at people. It clouded her judgment and made her not realize just what was precious. She had already ended the relationship, or so she said. Until he got the footage finished, he was single again, though he didn't want to be.

His mind was wandering not to Elena, but to why the Precursors had just attacked. He got a report of what had happened from Heavy 2-2, as GRID always talked to each other. Heavy 2-2 might not have talked to the UNSC ships, but it chatted away with the GRID prowlers and Seth constantly. He had friends on board it, and knew the Captain.

Seth walked off away from the area as Elena turned the corner. She stopped as she realized she was alone. She breathed deep and her breath nearly stuttered coming back out. Tears welled up in her eyes but she kept them from falling. If he brought the video footage, which she doubted even existed, then she'd be more than willing to apologize and kiss his feet for being like she was. She couldn't believe that she was so willing to abandon him like she was. What was

wrong with her? Didn't she love him?

She shook her head as she worked to get her mind back on what was happening. She needed to talk to her pilots involving debriefings and what they saw out there. She walked into the hangar and met Aldric and Falken.

"Hey General" Aldric said and saluted. Falken did the same and Elena saluted back.

"At ease. What did you see?" Elena asked.

"Two destroyers and twenty fighters. Same as you saw. Seemedâ€¦ I don't know, small now. Like they were checking the area out instead of actually there to fight us" Aldric told her.

"A patrol group" Falken suddenly said as she looked like an idea struck her. Elena looked at her. She was calming down now, and the squadron was actually warming up to her now that Elena had gotten her to settle down. She was still strict, but she overlooked more now than before, and in exchange the squadron, and frankly the whole wing, thanked her for it. She kept them on higher alert than before, but for good reason now, and she didn't berate them.

"Ma'am, a patrol group surveying the planet. They might have detected whatever this signal the Sangheili found and were investigating. They might have the same problem we have involving where it is" she told Elena.

"Good idea. Everyone, get some rest, you've earned it. Falken. Tomorrow I need everyone running sensor sweeps below. We need to find where this beacon is. The Sangheili Councilor couldn't even tell us which tunnel it was in considering how deep it is down below, just that he saw it." Falken nodded and Elena let them walk off to get changed. She sighed and walked to Ezekiel.

"This better not be another one of those things you found last time girlie" Ezekiel told her.

"I hope it isn't either, or we'll destroy it before they can make use of it" Elena told him.

"I just don't want a repeat of what happened aye?" Ezekiel asked her. She looked up at him and he was worried.

"Nothing is going to happen to me this time Zeks, don't worry" she smiled.

"Yeahâ€¦ you know, I had a talk with your da" Ezekiel said.

"Oh godâ€¦" Elena growled, as she knew what was happening.

"Are you sure you know he snuck around behind you? He just doesn't act like a guy who would" Ezekiel told her.

"You saw him Zeks! You were there! He yelled in front of you!" Elena snapped.

"Elena. I saw him being frustrated, I didn't see him get nasty with her. Maybe you should think this out more carefully" he told her

softly.

"If he brings me proof nothing happened, I'll welcome him with open arms. Until then, we're done" she told him.

"Girly, you know this is a two way street. If he provides the proof, and you do that, he may not want to come back" he told her quietly. Elena looked away from him. She was worried he was right. From how she had treated him all the time, she wondered why he was fighting so hard to get back with her. Maybe he was just trying to clear his name so he could move on without some bad information floating around the ship? He might just want this fixed so he could leave her. Elena knew that from what she read, since Seth was a Leo after he told her, that Leos didn't forgive easily. He might leave for good.

"God, I can't believe this is happening. If he does bring it, I'll have to find some way of forcing myself to stop being this way. I can't keep doing this to him" she told him.

"You'll figure it out quick. Oh, and I should tell you, the Colonel bitch? She can't exactly be called as such anymore. I don't know how to tell you this, but she's practically a new woman overnight, like something changed her to be nicer to others, what's her face? Aurora?" he told her. Elena wondered if Seth really had gotten intimate with her now, but if he didn't, what was she doing in his quarters?

She'd simply have to wait until Seth brought his evidence.

(Author's Note: Yes, I know it looks a bit childish or Japanese anime talk during the psych evaluation "I must be stronger! I am not weak! You are weak hahaha" and I don't know what hit me to put that there. Thankfully, it's over now. Wonder what the beacon does? It connects to the shipyard somehow, so maybe they might be able to do a better job this time?)

## 15. My Mind is Not My Own

\*\*[1000 hours, April 18\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth had spent practically the whole night after a quick nap to try and map the tunnels with Aaron. Even without Aaron as he went to sleep later did he continue to work at finding the panel. Riko nearly had the footage compiled for Elena to see.

Aaron showed back up twenty minutes ago, and went immediately to the shipyard to check on its status.

"\_Still nothing seen here. I'll head back" Aaron told him.\_

"\_Whoa whoa, hang on!" Seth said as he saw deep below the crust an area that seemed to have a slight hint of being machined metal.\_

"\_I think I found it!" Seth cheered as Aaron laughed.\_

"\_You did? That's awesome! Who would have figured we'd find the damn thing in a night" Aaron chuckled.\_

"\_Well, we worked our asses off for it, I think it sort of owed us and popped out. Alright, well, there's the panel of some sort. Tachi, you reading anything from this?" Seth asked.\_

"No response, power is dead" Tachi told him.

"\_Wait, wasn't that the same as what happened over a year ago? Deliverance Colony had the power thing too. Uh uh, let's see if there's something else around here, maybe a switch. There haven't been any reports of lost reactors from ships, no direct attacks beyond yesterday, and we more than likely just need to press a button" Seth told him.\_

"\_Frankly, I have to agree. The Precursors must have forgotten about the place and just wanted to get their stuff up and running. I'll sit here and see if anything changes" Aaron told him.\_

"\_Hey, I think I found something. Get ready to figure the shit out. Brace" Seth told them. He manipulated what he thought was a button and the place lit up.\_

Seth sat there hovering, thinking as he looked around.

"\_Nothing changed over here, anything happen there?" Aaron asked. Seth shifted his view for Aaron to see, and he grunted in approval.\_

"\_Well, it's at least up and running. Try downloading anything for Tachi to read" Aaron told him.\_

"\_Yeah, good idea. Tachi, get the cores ready for transfer, I'm gonna try and send it up" Seth replied.\_

"Understood, ready when you are" Tachi replied. Ever since Cortana had tried to translate the Precursor language over a year ago during the Deliverance incident, work had been done to further work on figuring out the technology. So far it was slow and painful work, but there were improvements. The data filtered up as Tachi marveled at the information.

"Extraordinary" he whispered.

"\_Play with it AFTER we get things figured out ok?" Seth told him.\_

"Alright, it's going to take some time for this to recompile up here" Tachi told him.

"\_Good. Riko?" Seth asked.\_

"Done Seth. Who do you love?" Riko giggled.

"\_Well Elena obviously, but you're awesome all the same" Seth laughed.\_

"I figured. Come on out and you can give this over to Elena" Riko told him.

"\_Hang on. I thinkâ€¦ I think I see the communications systems. Tachi, check this out, what does it say before I do anything?" Seth



asked.\_

"You're right. Communications. There's a problem with the output parameters of it however. Signal retrieval is off. No wonder there wasn't a response from here towards the shipyard. It was set on silent mode in a way" Tachi told him.

"\_Ok, so, could we figure out how to work it out of silent mode?" Seth asked.\_

"I think so. Give me time to look through the intel and I'll let you know" Tachi responded.

"Sethâ€|" Riko whispered amused.

"\_Fine, fine, I'm coming out" he responded.\_

Seth slowly came back to his body as the door to the pod opened. He looked around as Jenny and the others got him into a wheelchair and cleaned him off. They got his clothes on and checked his vitals, and then had him take a chewable and drink.

"Just this?" Seth asked.

"You didn't use up much this time. You took it easy" Jenny told him smiling.

"Sweet" he replied and got up. He walked a bit wobbly but gained his balance after a few steps and went to the DECON and walked out. He made a small detour to his quarters and downloaded the footage to his data pad, and then walked out towards the bridge. As he reached the area, Dare was standing there.

"Hey, where's Elena?" Seth asked. Dare turned around.

"You meanâ€| she's down on the planet with a survey team, didn't you know that?" Dare asked. Seth just stood there. He'd have to wait until she came back.

"Shit, I got my footage set up and I needed her to see it" he told her.

"Yeah, hmmmâ€| well, you'll just have to wait then. Hang on" Dare said as she saw the coms signal on the control panel at one of her officer's counters.

"This is Dare, go ahead Elena. Any sign of the place?" Dare asked.

"We're still searching, but we think it's further-" Elena started.

"We found it" Seth told them both. Dare looked up at him.

"Excuse me?" Elena asked annoyed.

"We found it. We searched all night for it, Aaron and I, but we got the spot. We're downloading the information right now so we can figure out how it works before anything gets played with. We also know that the signal transfer was screwy, hence the you know whos not

figuring out where it was" Seth told them. Dare blinked at him.

"You could have told us what you were doing Agent Franklin" Dare growled.

"Classified Captain Dare, I don't answer to you. As I said, nothing is happening yet, but the computer data base is transferring. I'm hoping we can jury-rig the communications to send a parse signal somewhere and not actually alert anything" he told her.

"A parse signal for what?" Dare asked.

"A Parallel multi-packet transfer toâ€¦| no place in particular" Seth suddenly corrected himself. Dare narrowed her eyes. Seth was being sneaky. She didn't like that.

"And if you can figure this out?" Dare asked.

"We might have an advantage. If not, nothing happens. We're pretty sure nothing will happen at least" Seth told her.

"Hello? I'm still here" Elena said over the coms.

"General, you might want to come back, considering they've found-" Dare told her.

"We see it!" Elena said over the coms. Seth was astonished. Was she really that deep underground? He suddenly had a visual from her on the view screen. She was in a pelican, underground. They landed quickly and got out, and he could see her leave the RORO and look around.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Elena walked forward a bit as ODSs came out. Buck walked up with her as they checked their surroundings. The place had similar landscaping to the cavern at Deliverance, but there was no lens on the ground, no sphere floating, just a room with what looked like a postbox sitting in the middle with holographic panels floating around throughout the whole room.

"Well, this is interesting. Nobody. Touch. Anything!" Buck barked orders as the ODSs checked their surroundings. Romeo and Dutch moved forward carefully as they looked around.

"Clear" "Clear" "No movement, clear" they all said as the Rookie walked up to the postbox panel as did Elena.

"I've never seen anything like this" Elena said and looked up at Rookie. He shrugged.

"Hey, there's something blinking here" Elena said over the coms.

"Yeah, that was what I hit to turn the place on" Seth said over the coms.

"So we can turn it off and stop playing with things right?" Elena growled.

"Hey, I was figuring out if it even worked! Back off!" Seth growled. Dare said something she couldn't hear.

"Let's just turn this off for safety measures. Agent Franklin, you will not touch anything again unless you tell us, do I make myself clear?" Elena snapped.

"Fine, sure, whatever, you go blow yourself up" he growled. Elena felt hurt by him saying that, but she shook it off. She pressed the button to deactivate the panel, but what happened was completely different. The button stopped flashing, and the whole place started to whine.

"Oh shit, no no NO! Not again!" Buck yelled as they all ran towards the pelican. Elena ran with them as the place powered up.

"Oh shit" Seth growled and ran from the bridge back towards the lab. He reached it and stripped on his run to the pod and got inside.

"Saddle me up!" He barked and the door closed after Jenny pushed the electrodes on his head while others pushed them on the rest of his body. The fluid filled up and he slowly went back into remote viewing. He shot back down as the pelican lifted off the ground.

"\_Nice one! Should have figured it'd work itself once the power was on! What else do you want to do, send an invite to the Precursors now Elena?" Seth growled.\_

"\_Seth! What's going on over there?" Aaron asked.\_

"\_Beats the fuck out of me! My ex just did something!" Seth told him.\_

"Shut up! Dare, check NOVA bombs! We might need to use them!" Elena yelled over the coms.

"Copy, prepping them and alerting Admiral Hood" Dare told her.

The room whined to almost deafening as suddenly, the whole planet fired off an unknown wave that looked similar to a nova. The wave blasted by the fleet, but did no harm.

"Sitrep!" Dare ordered as her officers started going through systems.

"Nothing's wrong ma'am, no problems with all systems" one officer told her.

"Then what was that?" Dare asked.

"\_A signal" Seth told both Elena and Dare, and sighed.\_

"A signal to what?" Dare asked.

"\_We were trying to figure that out. Aaron, anything?" Seth asked.\_

"You want to explain some things now Agent Franklin?" Dare

growled.

"I'd like to know this myself" Elena said annoyed.

"\_Both of you, shut up immediately. Confirming Yankee-Black classification. This doesn't leave the area. Have I made myself clear?" He said coldly to both of them.\_

Elena just sat there in the pelican in shock. He just classified the control panel and all information beyond her clearance. She was sanctioned, but she felt a hint of worry burrow into her.

"What? What's going on Seth?" Elena asked earnestly.

"\_Aaron, anything?" Seth repeated.\_

"\_Nothing on this side. I don't think that signal was for here. I thinkâ€¦ I think that was a burst of scrambled info, like it got so many signals over the years it just cleaned its buffers or something. That could meanâ€¦" Aaron trailed off.\_

"\_Oh shit. Everybody! You might have contacts!" Seth barked.\_

"No wayâ€¦" Dare said just as her sensors officer turned around.

"MA'AM!" he yelled. Dare looked at him and then at his panel. Multiple portals were opening up.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Darkness Rises]\*\*

Ten large portals opened up in the distant void, followed by fifty smaller portals. Eight destroyers came out, followed by a totally new ship, and what they might have thought was a cruiser. Fifty fighters shot out and headed towards them.

"Alert 5! Alert 5! All fighters in the void!" Dare barked as everyone ran to get to their stations. The carriers fired off all of their fighters as frigates moved to protect them along with the cruisers launching their own squadrons. Aldric and the others ran to the hangars and got inside their fighters quickly, then launched as they saw the swarm coming for them.

"Mother of godâ€¦" Aldric whispered.

"This is Admiral Hood! All ships at full alert! All fighters get ready! We may not survive this one!" Hood said over the coms.

"How are we supposed to handle that?" Jones growled in bewilderment.

"There's no wayâ€¦" Jacobs whispered.

"I'm coming up!" Elena said just as Eagle Squadron shot out next to Raven Squadron.

"Alright, screw any rivalry. Raven Squadron, we need to get this working. Falken, stick with me, Roberts, Hendrix, work with us. Jacobs, Merricks, Revil and Dax, suppression and control. Aldric, Reist, Tergen and Taz, keep them occupied. Does that sound good?"

Aurora said over the coms.

"Copy, we'll work with that" Falken told her.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score "Desperate Moment"]\*\*

Elena shot out of the tunnels with the ODS'Ts holding on for dear life. She knew how the pelican worked, and dipped and rolled where needed, coming close to the tunnel walls and ceiling but never actually hitting them. She shot out of the tunnels and climbed towards the atmosphere to see an incredible battle. Sangheili ships were desperately trying to cover their smaller human counterparts as the human ships traded what damage they could. Fighters and Seraphs mingled to handle single fighters, and they still had difficulty.

"Dear god" Buck whispered as he watched.

"I'm dropping you all off inside" Elena told them.

"Wait, what?" Buck asked astonished.

"I said, I'm dropping you off inside and arming up. I'm going out there" she told them.

"In a pelican? You're insane!" Buck looked at her in shock.

"That's an order Sergeant. Get inside" she growled and landed quickly after dodging incoming fire. He nodded as his team got prepped for a quick jump out. They got out as the maintenance crew prepped it for weapons.

Aldric shot after two fighters trying to engage Sarah, who was also leading another two from a completely different trajectory. Tergen was right with her, dropping his missiles behind him and while Sarah dropped mines. Aldric and Taz kept on the fighters as the missiles and mines punched into them, but they were desperately fighting for their lives. Falken and Aurora were dodging and evading everything they could, and Falken turned on her active camouflage.

"Falken!" Aurora said as she couldn't see her.

"Lead them off! I'm right behind you!" Falken told her. Roberts mimicked Falken as Aurora and Hendrix shot away. Two fighters gave chase and opened fire. Aurora and Hendrix dodged but were grazed, and Falken and Roberts came up behind and opened up with their rail guns after decloaking.

Battleships came to the foreground, but one was taken out almost immediately by one of the cruisers.

"Son of a bitch! They've got some firepower!" Jacobs gawked as the ship exploded. Heavy 2-2 slipped towards the first cruiser and opened fire. The shields took the hits and it returned fire back at them. Heavy 2-2 rolled and escaped a portion of the hits, but its shields failed.

"Oh shit" don't you fucking dare!" Aldric yelled as he watched the battleship slide next to the cruiser to stop heavy ordinance from firing. They traded smaller fire as Jones's squadron went to protect

them as best as they could. They were intercepted by enemy fighters and couldn't assist. Two destroyers were taken out from combined fire from the last three battleships as they fought. UNSC destroyers fired everything they had as a third lost its shields. Two whole wings of fighters were already lost, and one of them was Elena's. Vulture gunships were out firing barrages of every weapon they had. The whole area was lit up with rounds.

Elena shot out of the hangar in her pelican. She went right after a fighter heading by as one of Jones's squadron went to take it out. The fighter had a Precursor craft on its tail, and evaded incoming ordinance. Elena opened up with her missiles and saw the shields flicker. Her pelican was much slower than the fighters she was contending with, and she didn't have nearly as much firepower as the fighters. John had jumped into the back of the pelican without her knowledge and let his presence be known.

"Need a hand?" he asked. Elena looked back at him in awe.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" she growled.

"Helping. Drop the RORO, I'll cover your six" he told her and gave her a Spartan smile. She chuckled and popped the RORO as he mounted the chain gun attachments and latched himself to the ground and the sides with a harness. He decided to do something after, and grabbed another packaged chain gun from the overhead bin carriage and opened it up. He mounted a second chain gun next to the first, and held onto both with one hand.

"Elena! What the hell are you doing out there?" Dare watched as she floated by and continued firing at the same fighter. She kept her pressure up, even though she couldn't drop its shields nearly as effectively as if she was in a Black Blade.

"Helping, I'm not about to sit around inside the ship waiting for the end. If this is happening, I'm going down fighting" she told her.

"Holy shit! Elena is out in a pelican fighting!" Aldric said astonished.

"Are you kidding me?" Aurora whispered to herself as she saw in the distance the pelican maneuver.

"She's got some serious guts" Tergen whispered.

"She's still going!" Jacobs said as a fighter tried to come up behind her, but John hosed it with rounds. She finally took out the fighter she was attacking as Jones's squadron member winked a green light in response, thanking her. Her missile pods were completely empty though, and all she had was her mounted heavy missiles on the edge of the wings and her nose gun, as well as two Gauss cannons mounted on the roof. The fighter behind her fired its torpedoes, and she fired three flares to protect her and John. He opened up on them with the chain guns as one ignored the flare and continued after them. He took it out, but the fighter was still on their tail.

"Wowâ€¦ I had no ideaâ€¦" Aurora whispered and turned and headed after it. The fighter aimed its beam at Elena and fired, but she barely dodged, with a few inches remaining between her and the beam.

The paint on the roof of the pelican peeled away from the searing hot energy. Aurora fired her rail guns and caught the thing off guard, and made it back off as she fired her lasers at it in pin point mode. They carved into it and cut it in half, as Aurora came up near her.

"Thanks for the assist" Elena told her.

"You're insane" Aurora gawked.

"I'm doing what needs to be done" Elena told her. Aurora nodded in response, not even seen by Elena. She had no idea Elena knew how to pilot a pelican, let alone in a combat situation. Elena went after another fighter, not giving up despite her clear disadvantage. Aurora went after another fighter as Elena supported other fighters nearby where she could.

"I'm out" John told her, but it was a good fight. He expended all rounds and was reloading the heavy drums with more ammo as she fired her chin gun at a damaged fighter. She was doing little damage, but it was still something.

"We need to go back and rearm" Elena told him as she fired her last heavy missile at a fighter. It dodged, but the missile continued on and hit another fighter she didn't intend to hit. The Precursor fighter was struck and rolled from the impact, and Jones came up behind it and fired his medusas. The shields failed as he opened up with his autocannons and tore the thing apart.

"Thanks for the help fly girl!" Jones laughed.

"No problem" Elena replied. Heavy 2-2 was in a slugging match with the cruiser nearby. The second cruiser was trying to maneuver around to open up on them, but Heavy 2-2 was maneuvering as well, keeping the first between them. They were taking damage, but they were also stopping it from opening up on other ships. Two more destroyers were taken out, but over twenty ships were already lost. All frigates were destroyed except for one, and three destroyers were left. Four cruisers were knocked out, and one was severely damaged. Of the five battleships that came with them, one was already destroyed, and Heavy 2-2 was in a losing fight. She was still fighting incredibly hard to keep the cruisers occupied however, and was giving her all.

"We're heading back" Elena told John and he gave her a green light wink in response. She headed towards the hangar just as another Precursor fighter came after them.

"Elena! You have one on your six!" Jones yelled. Elena dodged the beam quickly and veered away from the hangar, away from the maintenance crew. She didn't want them getting hurt from her trying to land with the thing still attacking. Unfortunately, the fighter had other ideas for her.

Elena suddenly doubled over in pain, her head feeling like it was going to explode.

"Augghâ€| AAAAAAHHHHH!" she screamed as white hot flashes seared through her mind.

"General! What's wrong?" John said as he continued firing on the

fighter as it aimed again. Out of nowhere, the fighter collapsed on itself, looking like a tin can. Seth.

"\_Get the fuck away from her you bastard! RAAAAAAHHHH!" he roared as the fighter sputtered from the gravitic force he just put on it. He could feel his body lose energy, but he couldn't let her be hurt.\_

John stopped firing and ran to the cockpit. Elena was unconscious at the controls.

"General Gripen is unconscious! I'll land the pelican immediately" he said and took control of the pelican. Seth was stunned. The trigger must have activated. He realized though that he couldn't worry about that right now, as Heavy 2-2 was having its armor blown off.

"We've taken massive damage! We're barely keeping her together!" Heavy 2-2 responded as the second cruiser came around, now aimed at Heavy 2-2.

"\_NO!" Seth roared and shot at it, and pushed almost every ounce of energy he had into crushing the ship. The cruiser collapsed into itself, crushing like a vehicle in a multi-car pileup.\_

A cruiser headed towards the first one and opened up with its smaller particle accelerator, as did another cruiser with its MAC gun. The Precursor ship started to fall to pieces just as Heavy 2-2s reactor went critical and blew.

"\_Oh fuckâ€¦ god damn itâ€¦" Seth was in shock. He thought he could save them, but all he did was buy them enough time for the ship to take itself out.\_

Escape pods tried to get away, but only two made it from the blast radius. The others were incinerated as the blast finished off the Precursor cruiser. Even in death, it had done what everyone else was having difficulty with. It held the line against two superior foes.

The remaining destroyers weren't retreating, however, as even though there were only four of them, they were still doing decent damage. Seth was hurting, but he had to keep going. He had to figure out how to slow things down. He shot towards one of the destroyers.

"\_Tachi, I need help. I'm barely keeping with this. Do you have a translation of any of the buttons in here?" Seth asked as he reached the engineering bay. He was surrounded by Precursors who didn't know he was there.\_

"Trying, what do you need exactly?" Tachi asked.

"\_Self-destruct" he replied. Tachi whistled.\_

"That button right there" he replied. Seth checked the area and slipped into the controls, finding the override to immediately get self-destruct to activate.

"\_What does this button do?" he grinned devilishly in his mind.\_

He activated it and the self-destruct was surprisingly quick.



Detonations happened throughout the ship as the Precursors tried to find out how it happened, but it was too late. Favor was with Seth, as the destroyer was close enough to another destroyer to take them both out, as well as damage another nearby. The ships retreated from the battlefield as the remainder of the UNSC forces and Sangheili staved off the fighters. Thirty of them were destroyed, but over half of the fighters in the fleet were gone. It was a terrible fight, one that cost thousands of lives.

"Remaining bogeys are bugging out" Jones reported. Everyone sighed in relief.

"This is Master Chief Spartan-117, General Gripen is down, I repeat, General Gripen is down. She's not responding" he said. Seth was in pure shock. He ordered the pod to be opened as he slowly faded from his remote viewing and came back, and just flopped on the ground.

"Seth!" Jenny yelled as the nurses came up immediately to him and picked him up. He felt exhausted, and his heart was beating a mile a minute. They shoved a needle into his arm and injected him with a cardioinhibitor drug to slow it down. They shoved chewable aspirin into his mouth and brought an electrolyte drink. They then inserted multiple hypo shots into his arms and legs to rebuild the nutrients he lost. He slowly calmed down, but he wouldn't rest.

"I have to see Elena. I have to. Get me to her" he told them.

"You need to rest Seth, the doctors will take care of her" Jenny told him.

"Fuck that! Get me to her now! That's an order!" he growled and looked at her. Even in his condition, he couldn't abandon her. Jenny sighed and nodded. They got him cleaned up and put clothes on him, and then wrapped a thermal blanket around him as they took him through DECON, and then out and towards the medical ward.

Seth was wheeled in and they brought him right to Elena's medical room. She was just lying there, unresponsive.

"What happened?" he asked John.

"One minute she was heading towards the hangar, the next minute she screamed in pain. She seemed to be shaking. I thinkâ€¦ I think the Precursor fighter did something sir" he replied. Seth looked at her and had Jenny wheel him close. She wasn't moving now.

"Is sheâ€¦" Seth trailed off.

"She's sedated and anesthetized, but I thinkâ€¦ something triggered in her brain, as her nervous system is frazzled right now" the doctor said. He already knew. The trigger activated. It was causing extreme pain for her if she's awake, and more than likely stopping her from doing anything other than scream. A back up plan they installed in her more than likely. If they couldn't have her, they'd stop her from being used against them.

"Is there any way to stop it?" Seth asked.

"We're working on it, butâ€¦ it seems doubtful. It doesn't seem like

it's biological" the doctor told him. He suddenly was stunned with an idea.

"Doctor, I need you to leave temporarily. I apologize, but I need you out of this room" he told her.

"What?" she asked confused.

"John, please move her out, and leave as well" he said and looked up at him. He nodded and escorted the doctor out of the room.

"Tachi, get Dmitry here right now" he said sternly.

"He's on his way" Tachi replied.

Dmitry walked in twenty minutes later as Seth just held Elena's hand.

"I am so sorryâ€|" Seth whispered to her. She didn't respond obviously.

"Seth, you should be resting" Dmitry said as he put his hand gently on his friend's shoulder.

"I'll do it after this. Jenny, you may need to sedate me so I can actually sleep, cause thisâ€|" this will keep me up" Seth told her. She nodded understanding.

"Tachi, I need an entire scan of her with the new information we have. Dmitry, if you would?" Seth said. He nodded and grabbed a glove from his pocket in his trench coat and put it on, a cyber-glove. He moved it up and down Elena slowly.

"There!" Tachi said suddenly as he moved over her neck.

"Neural lace. Oh myâ€|" Seth, she's got THREE AIs loaded into her neural lace!" Tachi said astonished. Seth was stunned. Not one, but three of them were holding her captive in her own body, torturing her. She wasn't in the crystal this time; she was a prisoner among friends.

"We need to get them out of there" Seth said.

"Seth, you can't just-" Jenny told him.

"I know! Ok? I know! I'm figuring it out. Dmitry, we still have the crystal?" Seth asked. Dmitry nodded.

"Alright. Jenny, remember, this doesn't leave this room ok?" he asked. She nodded. She was able to listen to them talk classified information and not even bat an eye.

"Alright. She has three AIs somehow inside her neural lace, and I have no idea how they're fitting in there. So, we get them out, and lead her out of her mind, and back to the crystal. When the AIs charge after her, we flip around and I sling shot her back. It's going to be extremely hard, but I think I can do it. I don't think I've ever done something like this" he explained and sighed.

"It's never been documented before. This is unknown territory. Taking

her mind and shoving it back into the crystal? How are you going to do that?" Dmitry asked.

"I'm going to reach into her memories, and drag her out. If I have to, she'll come out kicking and screaming, but it's for the best" Seth told him.

"What? Seth, you know what happens if you do that! You could lose yourself in her memories!" Jenny told him with her mouth agape.

"I know! I knowâ€¦ but it's the only way. Aaron will keep a link to me to keep me from falling in. Riko will grab Elena the second those things are out. Tachi will track the transfer" Seth explained.

"This is definitely going to be hard" Dmitry told him.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this, butâ€¦ I gotta try. For her" he whispered.

"When she comes back, she better damn well forgive you and apologize for how she's treated you" Jenny told him sternly.

"She doesn't have to apologize about anythingâ€¦ alright, Dmitry, I need this room closed off, I want Dr. Montez to watch over her right now. I'm not trying to be mean to Rosen, but she cannot be in here while we do this ok? Jenny, I need you and the others to drug me up so I can get some sleep. Lord knows I won't be able to worrying about her" Seth told them. Jenny and Dmitry both nodded and Jenny wheeled him out of the room. Buck and the others waited outside the medical ward as he left.

"What's going on?" Buck asked as the others started to group up.

"I can't tell you, not just yet. We're working on it, trust me. If the plan I've concocted works, she'll be fine. If notâ€¦ well, it'll work" he told them. They just looked at him as he sat in the wheelchair. Jenny wheeled him away to his quarters and had the other nurses help him get in bed, and then put a caramel chew in his mouth and had him drink an electrolyte drink. They then had him chew down an energy bar, and then drugged him after. He fell asleep slowly after Jenny shoved four shots into him. His body still resisted the effects even to this day.

\*\*[0900 hours, April 19\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth woke up from his long sleep as he looked around. No one was around him as he lay in bed.

"Good, you're awake" Tachi said over his bone mic.

"Status?" Seth asked.

"Everything is ready Seth. The crystal has been brought into the lab and is hooked up. Elena has been transferred to the lab as well. Whenever you are ready" Tachi told him.

"I need to get prepped first. I'll be there in a bit" he said, and it hurt that he was putting Elena on hold, vulnerable as she was. She needed help, but he couldn't just jump in. He had to get ready. He

got out of bed and stretched, and then took a shower quickly. He brushed his teeth and got dressed, and then quickly went to the DFAC. The others were sitting in the middle table watching him as he got food. He sat down with them and looked at each.

"So?" Renee asked.

"So what? I'm eating right now to prepare. The plan starts in half an hour. Everything is set up, though I can't tell you how. I'm sorry. This may not work, I tell you all this now. We're working in unknown territory here. I'M working in unknown territory here. Butâ€|" he told them. They each looked at him.

"I have to do it. I can't just sit around and watch this happen to her" he told them softly.

"Good luck man" Buck told him and patted him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, good luck, go save her" Renee told him smiling. Everyone nodded. He thanked them and ate quietly while the others ate. He finished and got up and said his goodbyes to them, and then put his tray on the trashcan. He walked to the lab and went through DECON, and then walked into the lab itself. He took off his clothes and got into the pod.

Jenny walked up and put a caramel chew in his mouth, followed by a quick electrolyte drink and an energy bar, and then placed gel like vita bands on his arms.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Just came in. You can wear them in the pod and not get freezer burn" she told him. With everything floating around in his system, he might actually be able to do something inside the crystal. Jenny pushed the electrodes onto his skin carefully, and Riko leaned against the wall with her avatar. She nodded to him. She'd grab Elena when it was time, she promised him.

"Alright, are we ready to go?" Seth asked. Dr. Montez nodded as Jenny pulled away. The door closed and fluid slowly rose up around him. He took one last glance towards Elena lying on a medical bed nearby, and his heart ached.

\_Knight in shining armor has nothing on me. Hang in there Elena, this Spook is coming to save you.\_

\*\*[Music: Hans Zimmer â€" Prophet Journey]\*\*

The fluid rose over his face and he inhaled it, and let it flow down his throat. He felt himself fade away and then shot out of his body and towards Elena.

"All sensors good, ready when you are" Dr. Montez told him.

"\_This is Aaron, I'm ready man, good luck. I got a hold of you" Aaron said and Seth felt a slight tug on him. He knew Aaron was holding on for dear life.\_

"I'm ready" Riko told him softly.

"Transfer state is operational. It just needs the information" Tachi told them.

"\_Going in" Seth said and slipped into her mind. He weaved around, trying to find the connections. He found the brain wave that was being played with, and tracked it as the signal was traced towards her nervous system and from her neural lace.\_

Seth connected and rode the line straight into her neural lace, directing himself to any memory that was being accessed. He had no idea what he was looking for, this was completely out there. He noticed one hole he could go into, and it was being repeated over and over.

"\_Found it. Aaron?" Seth asked.\_

"\_Go on, I'm right here keeping the door open" he responded.\_

Seth slipped in and found himself in Elena's memory and at the same time not in a memory, but on board a ship. He looked around and saw it was a Precursor ship, and the aliens were indeed moving around inside. He hoped against hope he couldn't be seen, as he slipped behind a corner and hid carefully. He heard running and screaming, and looked around. He noticed Elena running down the hallway for dear life, away from two Precursors following her lazily. She had nowhere to go. One other came out and grabbed her, and dragged her back to some room as she clawed at the ground in terror, trying to get away. It took every ounce of his will to keep himself from shooting after them and attacking. He was no match for them in his present form.

"Aaron, didn't we try playing with trying to change how we avatared in certain places? We couldn't quite get it to work in the physical, what about the mental?" Seth asked.

"\_It's possible. We never tried doing it in someone's mind before because of the risk" Aaron replied.\_

"Trying it now" Seth whispered and focused. His body altered its form and suddenly became the strongest thing he knew physically. A Spartan. He wore MJOLNIR Mk VII armor and he saw through the visor. He took a step forward and rammed himself against the wall.

"Ouchâ€¦" he grunted. He had to get used to the body though, as they were quicker at reacting and stronger. He moved around a bit as he heard screams coming from the room Elena was dragged. He focused again, and tried to remember the guns the Precursors used. He needed something strong, far stronger than that. He thought and tried to focus a four beam Spartan Laser.

\_This would never work in real life. The damn thing would explode in my hand or fizzle out from lack of energy, but here it'll work.\_

He moved towards the door and opened it, and saw Elena was strapped to a table. The Precursors had previously dissected bodies on them when he saw the place last, and this was not an exception. He was horrified to see them cutting her open and taking her organs out as she was alive, and she choked and literally grew lifeless in front of him. They untied her and walked away to observe the organs as her

body just lay there, staring at the ceiling, dead. He was in pure shock. They couldn't have. She couldn't be.

Just then, her body slowly healed itself, closing the wounds. Elena blinked and looked around, and saw the Precursors again. They turned around and headed for her as she jumped off the table and ran towards the door, and almost right into Seth.

"Help me!" she screamed as he aimed the quad laser and fired. The beams hit the first one and carved through its shields and through its body, but the second dodged and hid, with a pistol of its own and fired. Seth was blasted back against the wall and fell down, his shields warning they were drained.

"Fuckâ€|" he grunted. Elena ran down the hallway as Seth got up and followed. The Precursor he had hit slowly regenerated and got back up. They must have been the AIs. Elena ran down the hallway and towards the lift. Seth ran after her and she waited for him to jump through as the doors closed.

"Whoâ€|" she started to say.

"It's me! It's me Elena!" Seth told her and got up from the ground. He took the helmet off and she looked at him in confusion.

"Seth? Howâ€|" are youâ€|" what?" Elena said as she had no idea what was going on.

"You're stuck in your own mind by AIs in your neural lace. We just found them yesterday. Remember when you were in the pelican?" he told her.

"Yeah, I just felt so much pain. God, were they the reason?" she asked.

"Yup. I'm in here with you trying to fix this. Look. Here's what's happening. We're in your mind right now. They're torturing you constantly in your own mind" he explained.

"Then how do we stop them?" she said as she stood right in front of him.

"I don't think we really can, at least not here. Elena, this is tricky, but I need you to come with me, out of your body" he told her. She looked at him oddly.

"I'm not a remote viewer Seth, I can't" she told him.

"Yes, you sort of can, but with help, and it's really hard to do. You need to hold my hand the entire time, do not let go or you will be lost do you understand? Not even if you were in excruciating pain. You cannot let go. We're going to the crystal again" he told her.

"The thing that held me before? Why? I don't want to be stuck there again" she replied worriedly.

"Calm down. The AIs will follow. I'm pretty sure their connected to you and will track you no matter what. If you enter it, I figure they'll travel with you to their own turf. Then, we simply flip

around and lock them up and send you back" he told her.

"Then let's get to it" Elena said. Seth nodded, and then she just looked at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Why did you come in?" she asked.

"I didn't give up on you like you did to me" he told her. She looked at him with a hurting gaze. Even with how she treated him, he was still there.

"We gotta get out of here, and I'm not exactly very familiar with this avatar, so just a heads up, we're making a mad dash to the door and out" Seth told her. She nodded as she just looked at him. Even with everything she did to him, he was there for her.

The lift opened and they both ran out, but Seth seemed to be much faster than her, and literally left her ten meters behind. He turned around and nearly stumbled over himself, not truly acclimated to the body. He grabbed her and she winced, and he lightened his grip as he realized he was much stronger than before. He grabbed her hand and ran her to the door as the third Precursor came out of nowhere.

"Oh shit!" he growled and threw himself over Elena, remembering there was an ability the Spartans used called Armor Lock. The Precursor struck down at him as he did it, and hit the armor protection system. He struck again and again, as Elena just huddled under his body, looking up at his visor as he stayed motionless.

"Seth!" she whispered as she started crying.

"Not giving up!" he growled as the armor lock system stopped and fired off its EMP blast. The blast knocked the Precursor back, just enough for Seth to roll with Elena and run.

"Go go go!" he screamed as they ran for the door. The Precursor AIs charged after them, and were just on their heels. Elena held onto his hand as they jumped through the white door he came through, and shot out from her body towards the crystal.

"\_Don't let go Elena!" Seth said.\_

"\_What? What is this?" she said as she felt nothing, she was just floating towards the crystal.\_

"\_Don't worry, just keep connected to me, focus on me" Seth said sternly.\_

She complied and continued to focus on him as they hit the crystal, and went right into it. They were suddenly in her mother's house, and were standing in the front.

"Alright, when they come through, we run right back out and leave them here, and then-" Seth explained, but the Precursor AIs suddenly appeared and back handed Seth across the living room. He slammed into the TV and rolled. Elena back up.

"SETH!" she screamed as he got up slowly. She ran to him as the Precursors followed slowly.

"Fuck that hurtâ€¦| good thing this doesn't last when we're outâ€¦|" he whispered as his back ached horribly. She got to him and helped him up. He looked back at the AIs as they came around the couch.

Come on, upstairs" he said and he went up with her being led by his hand. The AIs followed slowly up the stairs as Seth got her towards her room.

"It's a dead end!" Elena told him.

"Window?" he asked.

"We're two stories up! There isn't a balcony or anything!" she told him. She was really worried. He looked at the Precursors and then downstairs. They were coming towards them.

"Elena, piggyback, tight" he told her. She grabbed his back and it ached even more, but he had to fight the pain and keep her safe. He remembered doing Parkour with a hiking backpack on once, and adapted to the weight. He still remembered flopping all over the place and bouncing on things while he tried to adapt though.

"Adios assholes" he growled and leapt the banister and slid down the lower railing with his feet, and kicked off the wall at the bottom of the stairs and ran for the door. He got Elena down from his back and told her to run through. She had to enter her body alone.

"\_I can't keep the connection for much longer Seth!" Aaron told him.\_

"Go! I'll be right behind you! Now! You have to enter without me or we could be merged! Go!" he said as she nodded. The crystal was built to hold her mind, and was capable of transferring her directly back to her body. She was about to go through when suddenly, one of the AIs literally teleported behind Seth. Time slowed to a crawl as he looked over his shoulder and it impaled him with the long tentacle attached to the back of its head.

"NO!" she screamed as it lifted him off the ground, with the tentacle embedded in his chest. Seth's mouth was agape as he just blinked from the hit.

"Run" he choked out as he took one look at her with pain etched on his face.

His body suddenly fragmented, shattering into pieces as one knocked Elena back. Riko grabbed her through the door, and back to her mind.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena slowly opened her eyes and looked around.

"She's coming around" Jenny said as she shined a small pen light into her eyes. Elena blinked and squinted.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Montez asked. Elena sat up slowly as Jenny



helped her.

"Iâ€¦ don't feel any pain anymoreâ€¦" she told him softly.

"Good. Good, it worked" Dr. Montez told her quietly. Suddenly, she remembered what had happened.

"Oh god, Seth, is he back?" she asked and looked at the pod. It was still closed. The whole room was silent.

"Well?" she asked. Jenny looked away from her.

"Seth's mind is fragmented inside the crystal. We're not reading any higher brain waves coming from him" Dr. Montez told her softly. Her jaw slowly dropped as tears built up in her eyes.

"Noâ€¦" she whispered as she looked at the pod again. Seth was still inside, though it was doubtful he'd wake up.

"Can't Aaron, or what's her name, Thelma, go in and bring him back out?" Elena asked.

"I don't think you understand Elena. His mind is fragmented. We're reading the higher brain waves coming from the crystal, but it's completely off. Multiple forms of the same patterns are there, different parts. It's like having multiple personality disorder, but each one is him. They aren't named differently, andâ€¦ he may not know how to pull himself together. None of us do" Dr. Montez explained quietly. Elena was in complete shock.

"This can't be happening, this can't be happening! You've got to be able to do something!" Elena screamed.

"There's nothing we can do right now. None of us know how to fix his mind Elena. It's like breaking a glass on the ground. You might see the bigger pieces, but there are smaller bits that are strewn about that can disappear under rugs or anywhere. He might not even be the same if we do piece him back together. I'm sorry" Dr. Montez told her.

Elena just sat there numb. This time, Seth wasn't coming back. She started to cry as Jenny went to check on readings from Seth's pod. His life signs were stable, but there were no higher cognitive functions, and even if they could get his mind out of the crystal, they were only getting pieces out.

\*\*[Music: A Perfect Circle â€" The Noose]\*\*

"Heâ€¦ sacrificed himselfâ€¦" she whispered.

"Yeah, for someone who couldn't possibly be worth it" Jenny growled.

"Jenny, please" Dr. Montez looked at her.

"No, fuck this! You know what; you need a lesson in life! Riko, please show her the footage" Jenny snapped. Riko brought up the footage of what Seth did with Aurora, how he hypnotized her and explained things to her, and how there was in fact vocal vibration that Riko could read that Cherry could not.

"\_I'm not interested in you!" \_Seth said over the old footage.

"\_Hey, we can be friends"\_ Elena heard from the new footage. Elena felt her heart sink. He was telling the truth, she just didn't want to believe it.

"Oh my godâ€¦!" she whispered and looked at Jenny.

"Congratulations. You just fucked over the man who would give anything to take care of you, and now he can't even bring this to your attention on his own. I'm wondering if you're even fucking worth it!" Jenny growled out.

"Jenny, please! That's enough!" Dr. Montez said.

"No screw this! Seth never had this much bullshit happen to him in the past five years! And yet suddenly when she shows up all this crap pushes him to the breaking point! You know Seth told me one time, you said he fixes you. Guess what, he's taking those cracks with him! You lose them, he gets them! Damn you!" Jenny screamed at her. Elena just cried as Jenny yelled at her.

"That's enough Jenny! Stop this!" Dr. Montez tried to step in front of her.

"No! She needs this wakeup call! This whole time he's been loyal and you just kept shoving him away, finding some way to get rid of him! This whole time you must have thought deep down he wasn't your equal! Well guess what? You're not! You don't deserve him! He's better than you by a long shot!" Jenny finished. Elena felt her breath choke in her throat and looked at Seth's pod. She was right. Seth was stuck in limbo because of her. When they were under attack, he crushed the fighter and probably hurt himself in doing so. He fought and fought and fought, and she never realized just how much he sacrificed for what he did. For her.

Elena ran from the room and into the DECON, hearing the last words from the footage.

"\_I love her, and I always will" Seth said.\_

The doors closed and the DECON systems activated, cleaning her off. She ran forwards and down the hallway, running by some damage assessment personnel and right by John and Renee.

"Hey, what the-" Renee tried to say, but she was already gone. She ran as far as she could, and reached the lift. She settled down and entered it, still crying and was lucky there were no people inside. The lift brought her up to deck two, and she left and headed to her quarters. Her lover was in a coma, but unlike any coma anyone had seen. His mind wasn't even whole. They said it was like multiple personality disorder, but the shards were all the same person, not different personalities. She could only imagine what it was like for him thinking, trying to get an idea but then wondering if it was real when another part thought something else.

Elena tried to make it to her bed, but her legs just gave out and she fell to the ground, sobbing.

\*\*[0800 hours, April 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Elena just sat at her desk, numb. She hadn't slept the whole night. Everything just played through her mind over and over. Seth was gone, or close to it considering his condition. She heard her door alarm ring and didn't respond. She didn't want to see anyone right now, except the man stuck in the pod. She just kept staring at the ground, doing nothing but sit and stare.

Dare overrided the door and walked in.

"Hey" she said and Elena didn't respond. Dare kneeled next to her and put her hand on Elena's hand. She still didn't respond.

"The fleet needs to pull out. Seventh fleet is taking over, we've taken too many losses. We're retreating back to Earth once some repairs are made" Dare explained to her softly. Elena still didn't say anything.

"Seth's agency is going to deliver the pod off the ship once we arrive. He'll be kept under surveillance. They'll take care of him, though it's doubtful they can do much besides make him comfortable" Dare told her softly. Elena looked up at her, her cheeks and eyes red from no sleep and crying.

"I don't deserve him. I never did. Now he's stuck in that thing!" she made a gesture to the air and looked away.

"Elena, he did it to protect you. No one knew this was going to happen. He even told everyone this was an unknown he was trying to do, and itâ€¦ it didn't work out as well as it was supposed to. He did it for you. Accept that" Dare told her and rubbed her shoulder.

"He should never have done that. He should have just left me like that. He should have just left me in my fucked up cockpit out there back then!" she snapped as she looked at Dare with hurt etched in her eyes.

"Then the Precursors would have gotten a hold of you and we would have been in bigger trouble" Dare responded.

"And then Seth would have killed me! Fine! At least he wouldn't be like this!" Elena choked out. A few more tears fell down her cheeks.

"Maybe they'll figure out something. You never know" Dare told her. Elena just looked back at her desk. She had hidden her picture of him and her sitting outside the de Young Museum back when they were in San Francisco. He had his arm around her shoulders and was making a goofy face as she smiled, and then there was another picture below it where he kissed her forehead and she leaned in with her eyes closed. Her heart was being ripped apart as she looked at them.

"Come on, you need to eat. You have a lot of people you have to worry about right now Elena. This will get your mind off him. Come on" Dare said and eased Elena out of her chair and up. Elena grabbed a new uniform and went to take a shower, but only left the stall once the

water had stopped. She dried her hair slowly and brushed her teeth, but it was dull and she did it robotically.

She finally put her new uniform on and walked out with Dare to the bridge. She overlooked reports brought to her as she read through them, but didn't actually read. Her mind was mush. She couldn't bring her thoughts to the tasks at hand. She was sluggish and responded slowly to everything around her. Dare then brought her to the admiral's room, and sat her down with breakfast. She didn't eat until Dare forced food to her mouth. Dare immediately afterwards ordered Aldric to watch out for her the rest of the day as she went back to the bridge. She was a complete zombie the entire time.

**\*\*[One hour later]\*\***

Aldric had brought Elena to the observation room. She just sat there, quiet as she stared out at the stars.

"She can't function like this" Aldric whispered to Buck.

"No kidding right? Surprised she's even up" Buck whispered. Suddenly, Elena just started to droop and fall asleep. They both watched as she sat there and her head rolled to the side.

"Finally. God damn, I can't believe he'sâ€¦| no one could have expected this, no one" Buck said.

"Seriously" Aldric said and both of them carried Elena out of the room and to her quarters. Aldric watched over her as she slept as Buck checked with the cargo crews as they packed up of supplies from below.

"How many other things could go wrong for her?" Renee asked.

"You'd be surprised" John responded. Linda ate away from everyone. She had lost one of the few who understood what she did, Zen no thought. Seth wasn't around anymore.

"There's gotta be something we can do, something thoseâ€¦| spooks can do" Renee whispered.

"I don't doubt they're trying. We'll just have to wait and see" John told her.

Sarah had come to see Aldric while Elena slept. Roberts and Merricks and Jacobs all sat around in the DFAC drinking a soda together, but none of them talked. The ship was still going on about its daily routine, oblivious to one spook stuck in a pod. He wasn't them. He was being forgotten. He was being left out of the picture by everyone except one woman and a handful of GRID personnel on board.

## 16. Shattered Mind, Shattered Heart

**\*\*[1900 hours, April 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\***

Elena sat in front of Seth's pod watching it. He'd been unresponsive the entire time, and they had kept his body lying in there. She could barely see his face through the nutrient fluid and the fogged up

windows outside. There was a camera on the inside of the door, multiple actually, all watching his body for any movement.

She was numb to everything. She barely responded to her duties, and constantly found herself coming back to the lab. Jenny kept her distance the entire time, finding something to do around the place to keep herself busy. Her duties, as well as the other nurse's duties, was to take care of Seth when he left the pod and when he entered, and to keep him healthy. Right now, with no brain waves, there was nothing for them to do.

Dr. Montez was constantly reading data reports on his terminal, ignoring everything else for the most part. Again, his duties were attached to Seth.

"Incoming com call for you General Gripen" one nurse told her. She suddenly looked over at the nurse and then at the terminal. She then looked over at the pod and sighed. Elena got up from the floor and walked to the terminal and activated it.

"Hey, it's Dare. Did you finish the casualty report for 478th tactical?" Dare asked.

"I'mâ€| working on it" Elena said quietly.

"Doesn't look like it. You're in the lab again aren't you? Look, I know it's bad, but you have to do what you have to do remember? You have how many condolence letters to fill out? And Admiral Hood needs that report ASAP. If you can't do it, give it to your subordinates to do damn it" Dare growled. Elena looked hurt.

"Sorry, I'll get right to it" she almost whispered.

"Noâ€| give it to Falken, she's trying to get on your good side anyways. Considering the whole wing was wiped out, it's not like it can be given to the Colonel for it. Damnâ€| by the way, repairs are complete. We're heading back. We've picked up all the escape pods we found throughout the fleet. Heavy 2-2s crewâ€| what we found anywaysâ€| they're on board as well. Sixty personnel, out of how many? And then there is all of the rest of the fleet that was taken outâ€|" Dare told her softly.

"Things get worse and worse" Elena said quietly.

"No kidding. Look, just get the report done, and give the condolence letters to Falken. She'll handle it. Then you can bum around until we get back to Earth" Dare told her. Elena nodded softly.

"Dare out" and the coms turned off. Elena looked back at the pod again. Still no change. Dr. Montez was sitting fixed in front of his terminal, watching and reading and writing things down. He was about the only one who still had something useful to do. Elena was buried in paperwork, but in her defense, she didn't divvy it out to her subordinates enough.

She decided to remedy that as she couldn't handle it right now, and went out of the lab into DECON and then called all of her lowers. She gave them each their assigned work, the things they should have in fact done, and she suddenly found she only had a few packets of data pads for reading and signatures. She quickly scanned through them all

and finished with her name written on them, and then just sat in her quarters. Her eyes kept wandering to the picture hidden near her terminal.

Elena got up and went down to Seth's quarters and opened it, and cleaned the place up. She saw everything he had. She couldn't bring herself to move anything beyond making the bed. She felt she shouldn't even be in there, as his very essence seemed to mock her. She thought she didn't deserve to even be near him. Here she was, a Brigadier General in charge of three wings, one of which was a write off until future pilots were brought in to replace the dead. Seth was a civilian four star general in an agency she didn't even know had existed, Black Ops beyond classified operations and played hooky at times with the top brass and leaders of humanity. He remote viewed and did things with his mind she could barely even begin to understand. Granted she was an ace pilot, but he could see the insides of an atom or zip out to see the scope of the entire galaxy. She was miniscule compared to him.

And she was the reason he was brain dead, or close to it. She could feel tears welling up in her eyes again. She cried every day after thinking about him.

"I am so sorry Sethâ€¦ I really amâ€¦" she choked out to the air. She sobbed for a few minutes as no comforting arms would calm her down, no gentle voice soothed her or cheered her up, and no warming smile that was infectious to make her smile as well.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Dr. Montez pressed keys on his terminal in a calm and composed motion. He kept one hand brought to his chin holding his head as he read through data.

"Interestingâ€¦" he whispered to himself.

"Something happening Doctor?" Riko asked.

"Yes, at least I think so. Take a look at this. I've been watching it for the past day, little by little. Check it out" Montez told her. She read the data as it went by on the scrambled and shredded fragments of brain waves coming from the crystal. Seth's brain waves were nil. There were hundreds of waves mixing together, all deformed and hardly cohesive. They were the fragments of his mind, moving around.

Suddenly, one of the waves connected and merged with another. Nothing else happened after.

"Waitâ€¦ are they connecting?" Riko asked.

"It seems that way. It's slow, but it's happening. I've seen it happenâ€¦ six times so far, and it seems to be speeding up. It's barely noticeable, and you have to keep a trained eye on it, but it'sâ€¦ as if his mind is rebuilding itself or destroying itself. How it's rebuilding itself or deleting the waves I have no idea, and that's worrying." Riko looked at Dr. Montez.

"So, for all we know, he's tearing himself apart or trying to fix himself? Tachi" Riko said.

"I'm here, though with the amount of data we've recovered, you have maybe a few minutes until I have to go back. The amount isâ€¦| incredible. Cortana is doing her best to help, but this isâ€¦| it's hard to keep up with Riko" Tachi told her. Riko glanced at the terminal Tachi was working through the Precursor information. The code was staggering, even to them. There was so much that Tachi felt sluggish.

"Then I'll do it. Go back and work on the data we've got" Riko told him. He nodded and his avatar disappeared.

"Riko, I need you to watch the next merger. We need to know if it's indeed destroying itself or rebuilding" Dr. Montez told her.

"And if it is rebuilding?" Riko asked with a smile.

"Then we might have a shot at getting him out of there" Dr. Montez replied with his own smile.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Multiple voices, all sounding the same, echoed inside the crystal to no one.

"\_Where am I?"\_

"\_Who am I?"\_

"\_STOP YELLING!"\_

"\_I hate you allâ€¦|"\_

"\_Hmmm, this is extraordinary"\_

"\_Go away"\_

"\_Umâ€¦| please don'tâ€¦|"\_

"\_\*HISS\* \*GROWL\* \*SCREAMS\*"\_

"\_I can hear you! You're right there!"\_

"\_I'm talking to you! Shut up! I'M TALKING TO YOU!"\_

"\_Elenaâ€¦|"\_

"\_This is nothing! Bring it!"\_

"\_They're comingâ€¦| oh my god they're comingâ€¦|"\_

"\_I can feelâ€¦| everything and nothingâ€¦|"\_

"\_I can't live like thisâ€¦|"\_

"â€¦|"

"\_ $\hat{I}^{\frac{1}{2}} = c / \hat{I}^{\gg}$ ,  $E = hc / \hat{I}^{\gg}$ ,  $_{--}E\hat{I}^{\gg} = hc$ "\_

"\_So this sky diver jumps out of a plane and his parachute won't open, and he just starts praying "Buddha Buddha Buddha" and these big hands come out of the sky and slowly bring him down and gently put him on the ground. He looks up and yells "JESUS CHRIST!" And the hands just flatten him."\_

"\_Hope"\_

"\_I love you"\_

Hundreds of voices spoke at the same time, and none of them were listening to each other.

\*\*[0400 hours, April 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, En Route Through Slip Space towards  
Earth]\*\*

Elena tossed and turned in bed. She tried to sleep, but she was getting vivid dreams. She saw through the eyes of someone running down a hallway, and then another pair of eyes crawling on the wall. Then another was standing in front of a white board writing away at equations, and another was a standup comedian in a room with no one listening. Another pair of eyes just sat in a corner of a room staring at the ground, and yet another was drawing extremely creepy pictures all along another hallway.

The dream went back to the first pair of eyes as they looked back and saw some€| thing€| crawling along the walls after her. She suddenly woke up as she heard the voices from each one, though they were dull and distorted. She couldn't figure out whose voice they were, but they all seemed to sound the same. She was sweating and fearful after seeing the thing crawling along the walls towards her. She looked around and found herself in her quarters.

She got up and went to her bathroom and splashed some water from the faucet onto her face. She looked in the mirror. Even with the past few days of trying to sleep and move forwards, little by little, she was still having difficulty. She looked like hell, with almost bloodshot eyes and her black hair had a few strands of grey going through it near her bangs because of stress. She plucked them out, though it hurt, and checked the rest of her hair. She was really tired, but she just couldn't stand the dreams anymore. She had fallen asleep once in the lab, and had slept well there that one time. She hoped maybe, just maybe, that she could do it again and not get in anyone's way as she stayed there.

She had heard nothing from the lab or the GRID forces on the ship the past few days. They pretty much stayed together the entire time, and didn't really mingle with anyone. Everyone already figured they were beyond understanding. A few marines tried to start conversations with them, but they simply stared back at them in confusion. What she did see was that most of the operatives were extremely skilled at all forms of close combat, and extremely accurate with most forms of small arms and sniper rifles. They seemed to rarely if ever pick up an assault rifle in the target range. They preferred easily concealable weapons or long range, nothing in between.

She had even seen Dmitry at one point sharpening a somewhat curved blade when she was going by. His training in the SpetzsnaZ made him incredibly good with it, and probably could even make Fred back off.



Fred was the deadliest knife specialist of the Spartans, but Dmitry even made him raise an eyebrow. Seth had once told her he was even scarier than he was in close combat, though Dmitry couldn't hold a candle to him when it came to Parkour.

She got up and put her casual clothes on and then grabbed a pillow and a small blanket and then walked out of her quarters. She went to the lift and down towards the lab. She then went through DECON as she wobbled from so little sleep, and then entered. As she walked slowly to the pod to lay against it and sleep, Dr. Montez was moving back and forth between different terminals.

"Extraordinary! Another!" he said as his face lit up. He seemed to be buzzing around with no need for rest. He had countless empty cups of coffee near some terminals. Elena blinked and carefully tried to keep awake as she watched him with curiosity. He hadn't even seen her walk in, and the nurses were all fast asleep in their quarters, including Jenny. Riko popped up nearby and looked at her. She nodded and smiled. Elena nodded back and looked at Dr. Montez.

"What's going on?" Elena said quietly to her.

"You'll never believe what's happening" Riko told her smiling. Dr. Montez ran to another terminal and typed some things in. Elena was confused.

"Another! Riko, It's getting faster! Almost one per hour at least now! They're merging! He'sâ€¦" Dr. Montez trailed off as he saw Elena sitting there leaning against the pod. She had a pillow and a blanket with her, and she looked tired.

"Oh, Ms. Gripen, I can tell you are having difficulties with sleeping already" he said softly. She nodded.

"This seems to be the only place I can get some shut eye" she told him softly.

"Bad dreams?" he asked.

"Somewhat. I can't tell; it'sâ€¦ like I'm going insane. The dreams stop when I'm here" she told him and blinked again, fighting the need to go back to sleep.

"Going insane? What's happening?" he asked.

"I don't know, Iâ€¦ they seem to be going away slowly though, soâ€¦ maybe my mind is just playing tricks on meâ€¦ or maybe it's the guilt" she told him and looked up at the pod she was leaning against.

"Hmmm, well, hopefully they'llâ€¦ wait, did you say their going away?" Dr. Montez asked. Elena nodded. Montez looked at Riko.

"How long have these dreams been happening?" Riko asked.

"Aboutâ€¦ three days?" she told her. Riko immediately looked at Montez. His eyes were wide behind his glasses, and his goatee covered mouth dropped.

"Ms. Gripen, what might these dreams look like? Can you describe

anything?" he asked. She told him about running down a hallway and other confusing parts in them.

"Oh myâ€¦ Ms. Gripen, you might be connected to Seth's mind still" Dr. Montez told her softly. She was fully awake after he said that.

"What?" she asked.

"It's possible you have a connection to him right now that hasn't dissolved. Did he touch you in any way before Riko pulled your mind back to your body?" he asked. She nodded.

"When heâ€¦ whenâ€¦ a piece of himâ€¦" she trailed off and looked away. She couldn't cry, she couldn't, not now.

"Then that piece might have just given enough to link you to his subconscious somehow. You said these are going away yes? How so?" Dr. Montez asked her. She told him about how each time the amount of eyes she seems to see through lowers and seems to slightly change, as each time the personality behind the sight seems to differ a bit, like two pieces came together.

"Riko, you're keeping track of the power readout each time a merger happens right?" Dr. Montez asked. Elena looked confused at both of them.

"Sorry, we believe your dreams are connected to the mergers of brain waves we've been detecting in the crystal Ms. Gripen. Each time a merger seems to happen, you said the sight you see seems different. He might be rebuilding himself. This brings us to the energy readout. Each time there's a merger, there's a slight spike in power readout in the surrounding area. It's not exactly noticeable, but there was a spike when you came back to your body. Now there are many smaller spikes, but they are multiplicative, not cumulative" he told her.

"Whatâ€¦ what does that mean exactly?" Elena asked him. She wasn't exactly a scientist. She flew fighters and led pilots in protecting humanity.

"Ms. Gripen, he's done this before" he told her.

"When?" she asked.

"When he was six" he told her. Her eyes went wide. He had told her about what had happened involving leveling the base he was captured and taken to. Could he have created the energy for that simply by fragmenting his own mind and bringing it back together as a defensive measure? An energy fragmentation bomb.

"This is all simply a theory now, but we are beyond hypothesis already. It fits Ms. Gripen. He might be coming back" he told her. Her heart nearly leapt into her throat. He was trying to come back.

"But he's stillâ€¦ in the crystal" she suddenly realized and told them.

"But look at what you have! You have a connection now that you tell

us about these dreams! We might be able to get him out!" Dr. Montez told her enthusiastically.

"But I'm not a remote viewer" Elena told him.

"We might be able to work around that. Aaron and Thelma might be able to pull you out like Seth did and do it for you" Dr. Montez told her.

"But I can't work like they can even if they did. I saw how the crystal worked twice already. Those AIs" she trailed off. They were almost impossible to take on.

"Riko will join you in that matter. She'll track you and protect you" Dr. Montez told her and looked at Riko.

"Don't worry Elena, I'll watch out for you" she told her and nodded.

"When do we do this?" Elena asked.

"When he's sufficiently rebuilt. I'd say six waves" Dr. Montez told her.

"Why not wait until it's just one?" she asked confused.

"Here, let me try to explain this. The mind works in multiple different ways. There is the analytical side, and there is the reactive side. Now, it further breaks down into Conscious, Subconscious and Superconscious, and then further breaks down into Cognitive, Conative and Affective, which subgroups-" Dr. Montez started to explain.

"Antonio, I think she gets the idea, simplify it for her" Riko told him smiling.

"Right. Needless to say, we need it to reach six waves. Delta, Theta, Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Mu. Once it's like that, we just need a stimulus of some sort to bring him "on" if you will and have the waves work in concert for one reason" Dr. Montez told her.

"How long until that might happen?" she asked. Dr. Montez looked at Riko.

"About the same time we reach Earth, give or take a few hours or at most a day past" he told her.

"Then make sure everything is ready" she told him.

"Wait wait wait. We need to explain the consequences. You aren't physically similar to Seth and the other remote viewers. There could be side effects" Montez told her.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Well, the maximum time you can be in there will be half an hour once we start. Afterwards, because of the way the pod works it could cause problems with your nervous system. It doesn't exactly work the same way as a cryo stasis pod works during slip space. Damage can occur if you stay in longer. We don't know where the damage could

occur. It could cause breaks in bones from calcium restriction, muscle tearing from fiber degeneration, nerve damageâ€¦ it could even cause blood clots. If you don't come out under half an hour, you could die" he explained. Elena thought for a few seconds and looked at the pod.

"I'll do it" she told him.

"Ms. Gripen, maybe you need some time to think it over before you jump into this. Take a few-" Dr. Montez started.

"I said I'll do it. I owe him. I need to" she told him. She stood up from her position and ran her hand gently over one of the windows of the pod.

"And then he can be freeâ€¦" she whispered.

\*\*[1120 hours, May 4\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Reaching Sol System]\*\*

Elena watched with anticipation as the \_Conundrum \_came out of slip space with the rest of the fleet. They started to orbit Earth and headed towards assigned platforms for repairs and personnel drop off. She had been waiting for this day the entire time they were in slip space. Dr. Montez had constantly been keeping her updated on the wave mergers. They had only ten more, and they were nearly complete.

"Alright, dock us and latch on" Dare told everyone.

"Docked, latches onâ€¦ pumps locked. Engines cold" "Weapons safeties are on. All pods closed" "Hangars are cleared, munitions secure" she heard around the bridge.

"I'm going down to the pelican hangars to see Renee and John off" Elena said. Dare nodded. She walked out of the bridge and down the hallway to the lift. She entered and headed down, and exited out near the hangar. As she walked over, she saw Renee in her battle armor and John in his armor. MJOLNIR armor never stayed with the ship, it was issued to the Spartan and was theirs until given back to a specific maintenance crew or the Spartan died. All other forces wore their armor until they reached their assigned base, or left it at a base and continued on to meet family.

"Well well, the great leader comes out of her hole. Glad to see you Elena" Renee smiled. Elena chuckled.

"Yeah, came to see you guys off. Where are you headed?" she asked.

"Los Angeles. My parents live there. Gonna see them for a bit. You know, you could come with us and visit, get your mind off things" she offered.

"Actually, there's a plan that I'm a part of that I didn't tell you guys before" she told them smiling.

"Seriously?" Buck said behind her. He was wearing his ODST armor as was the rest of his team. They were all heading back down for a bit of R&R after their huge battle. Once the fleet was refit, they'd come

back up. It'd take a month at least, but they'd come back. There was a job to do.

Everyone seemed to crowd around her, including the other Spartans.

"Shit, are all of you going down?" she asked.

"Hey hey hey, no changing the subject. What plan?" Buck asked.

"Spill the beans General, you can trust us" Aldric said.

"Look, I can't, it's a classified operationâ€|" she told them.

"It involves Seth doesn't it?" Renee asked.

"What? No, well, I can't really say. It might not work at all" she told them.

"Hey, if there's a chance, then there's a chance. Anything we can do to help? He's kind of looked out for us quite a few times already" Buck told her.

"I don't think so. Look, don't worry about it, it's being taken care of by his agency, and I'm just helping out. I just hope-" she said just as two pelicans flew towards the ship.

"That's odd. No one is coming in, they're going out" Ezekiel said as he watched them hover outside the windows.

"This is Captain Welkens of the Office of Naval Intelligence. We have clearance, allow us to enter immediately" they heard over the coms. Ezekiel looked at Elena. Everyone looked confused.

"Shit, ok people! Move these pelicans to their holding points until these buggers leave!" Ezekiel said as the pilots got out of the pelicans and they were loaded into their bays off the platforms.

"What the hell is going on?" Elena asked.

"You don't know what's going on? That's a problem" Aldric said worriedly. Generals always knew what was happening on the ship they were in.

The pelicans came in and landed softly on their dampers and the ROROs opened up. Multiple ONI troops poured out of the crafts and Captain Welkens stormed towards Elena.

"Brigadier General Elena Gripen?" he asked.

"Yes?" she said confused.

"By article fifty three of the security reinforcement act, we are putting you under protective custody until deemed otherwise. Your rank has been suspended until further notice" he told her as a man came up behind her and tried to grab her hands.

"Hey! What the hell!" she yelled and pulled away. Everyone else was

annoyed at what was happening.

"On what grounds? What charges?" Aldric yelled as everyone watched.

"A Manchurian trigger was verified to have been disposed of possibly from brain washing. She may have other triggers that are not yet activated. She is a danger to UNSC forces, and therefore is being placed in custody" Welkens told them.

"That's bullshit! The only trigger shoved her nervous system into constant pain!" Dare suddenly said as she stormed into the hangar.

"Captain Dare, do not interfere. This comes from the top brass in ONI" Welkens said as Dr. Wright came up next to Dare.

"Captain Welkens, don't you believe that a trigger to assassinate a high official would happen before trying to stop her? A trigger that compromises her ability to move without feeling extreme pain would severely hinder any attempts to harm anyone on board" Dr. Wright explained.

"Look, leave the logic to people who have been watching this alright?" Welkens growled.

"That means someone leaked the info behind my back" Dare growled. The ONI soldier put hand cuffs on Elena's hands behind her and pushed her forward.

"Hey! Knock it off!" Aldric growled.

"Don't push her!" Renee yelled as the soldier behind her forced her forward.

"Hey!" Elena snapped as the guard behind her whacked her back with the stock of his rifle. She nearly fell to the ground. Buck and the others snapped into action and struck multiple ONI guards nearby, knocking them to the ground and bringing their weapons to bear. The ONI guard brought their weapons up and it turned into one massive Mexican standoff.

"Drop your weapons and maybe, just maybe you won't be tried for treason" Welkens growled to them. There were forty ONI forces compared to the twenty friends standing there with their weapons raised. None of them flinched as Buck's rifle was aimed at an ONI soldier and Linda was aimed right at Welkens.

"I'd say you're the one who needs to drop your weapons and let her go. This isn't right. She hasn't done anything wrong and you know it. This is bullshit" Aldric growled as he aimed his dual SMGs at two different ONI soldiers. Renee had her rifle aimed at another, but it looked like a losing fight if they started firing.

"I'm going to give you to the count of five" Welkens told them.

"I'm going to give you to the count of three" Dmitry said as he came up behind him with a knife to his neck. 90 GRID operatives came out of nowhere all aiming their rifles and sidearms at the backs of the ONI soldier's heads. Laser targeting was tracking everyone as two

GRID HAMMER drones came into view, both equipped with heavy ordinance. Multiple ARGUS drones were flitting around in the air with small machine guns attached.

"This is treason" Welkens growled.

"No, YOU'RE performing treason. Going against a General of the Air Force that isn't even in your chain of command? The only ones who get to do that are us, and the Air Force's special operations offices. And the fact that it looks like your men just tried to aim at us" Dmitry said as some of the ONI soldiers turned their attention to some GRID snipers aiming at them "proves you are about to try and pull a cue on us. I suggest you drop your weapons before we wipe the floor with you" he growled out with a huge smile on his face. Dmitry tended to always smile, and everyone could tell the smile was not friendly, it meant he really would kill him without a second thought.

W elkens motioned with his hand and the soldiers dropped their weapons on the ground. Renee ran up and grabbed the keys from one of the soldiers and unlocked Elena's cuffs.

"Thanks" Elena told her and rubbed her wrists.

"No problem" Renee replied and dropped the cuffs on the ground.

"You'll regret this, these orders come from the top of the top in ONI" Welkens smirked.

"Our orders come from the Secretary of Security dipshit. I'm pretty sure whoever you're taking orders from, they are a lot lower on the food chain than he is. Add in the fact you are stopping a tier 0 asset from being assisted, and you can bet your ass ONI will be investigated because of this little blunder" Dmitry said still smiling.

"Howâ€¦ how do you know the orders aren't coming from the Secretary of Defense?" Welkens asked worriedly.

"Really? You wish to ask that question? So good of you to let us know that. Let's have a chat with our superior shall we?" Dmitry chuckled and picked up a cell. He dialed it and put it back in his pocket and listened with his bone mic.

"Yes?" Metfield asked over the coms.

"Sir, sorry to disturb you. We have a bit of a problem here. We're wondering if Rickenbacker asked ONI to do anything up here" Dmitry asked. Welkens face drained of all blood. He was really talking to the Secretary of Security.

"Let's take a look" Metfield responded.

"I can wait sir" Dmitry said and smiled towards Welkens. Three minutes passed as Metfield called up Rickenbacker.

"James, how are you doing today?" Metfield asked over the conference call.

"I am doing good, how about yourself Richard?" Rickenbacker asked.

"Hmmm, well I was doing alright until I heard about this little thing happening on the UNSC ship \_Conundrum.\_ You see, ONI sent up two pelicans to take a Brigadier General Elena Gripen into custody. You wouldn't per chance know anything about that would you?" Metfield asked.

"That's news to me. No, I didn't authorize that, and no one brought that by my attention either. Is it happening right now?" Rickenbacker asked as Dmitry played it in mute mode from his pocket for everyone to hear. Welkens was literally scared out of his mind.

"Yes, we're actually conferencing with one of my agents on board. Dmitry?" Metfield said.

"Hello Mr. Secretary. I am holding multiple ONI soldiers here at gunpoint with other agents. As you know, we have top control over all security matters, and this was not even brought up to us in Earth space. We were wondering if you could shed some light on this?" Dmitry asked as all of Elena's friends were smirking. Someone was going to get their asses nailed to the wall.

"I authorized no arrest of Elena Gripen. I already know about the trigger and know it was taken care of by one of your agents correct?" Rickenbacker asked.

"That's correct James. Dmitry, what is the current status of my tier 0 asset?" Metfield asked.

"He is still currently unavailable Mr. Secretary. Elena Gripen was going to assist in a classified operation, as she is medically cleared by us for all triggers. We were the ones who found the trigger originally if I may add" Dmitry said still smiling. Welkens was almost terrified. He was sweating as the entire conversation happened.

"You gonna die honky" Dutch chuckled out.

"I know all about that Dmitry. Is she alright?" Metfield asked.

"Yes she is. She's right here" Dmitry replied and smiled at Elena, a warm smile this time. She smiled back.

"I'd like to speak with her" Metfield told him.

"I'd like to speak with her as well" Rickenbacker said after. Every one of her friends gawked as Dmitry walked forward and handed his cell to her.

"Hello Mr. Secretaries" she said as Dmitry went back to aiming his gun at Welkens.

"Good morning Ms. Gripen. I trust before this happened you were having a good day?" Metfield asked.

"I was doing well considering we were going to start the operation soon once it was complete" she told him.



"Good to hear. James?" Metfield said.

"General Gripen, I sincerely apologize for these actions and accusations against you, and rest assured we will get to the bottom of this. Someone isn't walking away unscarred. Also recognize at this moment, while working with Richard's agency, I am authorizing temporary immunity to you. Do us proud" Rickenbacker said. Elena's mouth went wide.

"Thank you sir, I will not do anything that may damage the reputation of the UNSC or the uniform I wear" she said and a devilish smirk came over her mouth as she looked at Welkens.

"I know you won't. Now, Richard, I believe this requires a bit of digging on both of our sides? Our forces are open for anything you need" Rickenbacker told him.

"Don't worry James, we'll work from the shadows like we always do. Oh, Ms. Gripen, would you please put us in touch with the man in charge of the so called arrest?" Metfield asked in a light tone.

"Yes sir, he's right here sir" Elena said and handed the cell to Welkens.

"This is Captain Welkens" he said with a cracking high voice.

"Yes sirâ€¦ I see sirâ€¦ I believe my orders came fromâ€¦ yes I know sir, I understandâ€¦ I don't know beyond that sirâ€¦ I will sir... thank you sir. We'll leave immediately" Welkens said quickly. He hung up the cell and handed it back to Dmitry, and everyone saw the dark spot in the front of his pants. You don't piss off Metfield, or Rickenbacker.

"We're to retrieve our weapons and leave immediately. We are to disavow any sight of the operatives seen here and ignore any further responses towards Brigadier General Elena Gripen until further notice. We were never here, this never happened. Iâ€¦ I'm supposed to talk to someone once we leaveâ€¦ I don't even know who that person isâ€¦" Welkens said worriedly.

"Have a safe trip" Dmitry said smiling. The ONI soldiers got back into their pelicans and headed back out, and realized the whole hangar was watched by five GRID pelicans heavily armed as well as a prowler and a destroyer, Light 6-6.

"Funny, I don't remember there being this many spooks here with us during the trip backâ€¦" Buck whispered to Renee.

"I don't eitherâ€¦ where did half of them come from?" Renee whispered back.

"That would be the hangar opposite of us. Were we festively late?" Dmitry asked smiling.

"Nope, you were right on time" Elena chuckled.

"Good. That was fun" Dmitry grinned a warm smile to everyone. Buck looked up and saw the snipers had disappeared from their perches, and a good portion of the other GRID agents had disappeared as

well.

"Active camo or what?" Buck whispered.

"No idea" Mickey replied.

"Did not expect that guy to piss himself, that was classic" Romeo chuckled.

"No shit, seriously. That was awesome" Dutch chuckled.

"Now that that has been dealt with, I believe the pelicans should most likely be moved back down and give you all a chance to go home for a bit yes?" Dmitry smiled.

"Thanks man" Dutch said.

"Yah, seriously, that was epic" Mickey replied.

"Happy to help. Elena, if you would?" Dmitry asked.

"Bye guys" she said and hugged each of them, including Kelly. They waved goodbye and got into the pelicans as they were lowered back down to the platforms and headed out. Elena watched them go and turned around.

"Ready?" Dmitry asked.

"This is going to be so amazing!" Dr. Wright said excitedly.

"Not for you. You stay outside" Dmitry told him.

"What? I can't go inside?" Dr. Wright looked confused.

"You are not clearanced for our agency's operations. No, you can't see, but she can. You are well aware you can't share any of what you see correct Elena?" Dmitry asked.

"Yes, of course. Sorry Daveth, not this time" Elena said. Dr. Wright looked wounded and frowned. He was a doctor of brain sciences. He would have jumped for joy at the chance to see what Seth could do. Seth was not a lab rat for the doctor, however.

Dmitry and two GRID agents followed Elena towards the lab and went through DECON. As soon as they entered, Elena was surprised with how many more people were inside. There were black suited personnel in all directions, and white suited scientists and doctors working on terminals. The whole place was packed. A Medical bed was set up with Seth's body now on it. He was just lying there, motionless, his eyes closed. Elena's heart ached for him to wake up.

"Now, we're going to need you to strip" Dr. Montez told her. She took a deep breath and nodded, and took her clothes off. No one seemed to care she was naked. They saw Seth in the nude all the time, and more than likely saw other remote viewers in the same position, both male and female. Elena got into the pod as Jenny came up to her. Elena looked worried she'd be angry, but she started putting electrodes on her forehead and wrapped others around her neck.

"Bring him back safe" Jenny whispered to her. She nodded. Riko's

avatar showed up and stood near the pod.

"Don't worry, I've got your back in there. I'll protect you" Riko told her. Elena took another deep breath. This was her first ever attempt at remote viewing. It was assisted by Aaron and Thelma, but it was still her first. The previous two times were Seth doing everything to help her. This was completely unknown territory for her, in all senses. She had no idea what to do.

"Chew this" Jenny said and put a caramel chew in her mouth. She chewed it up and swallowed, and then drank an electrolyte drink. Jenny then checked her vitals and documented them.

"Aaron, Thelma, are you there?" Dr. Montez asked.

"\_I'm here" Aaron replied.\_

"\_I'm ready to go" Thelma responded with a chippy voice.\_

Elena actually thought Thelma sounded quite cheerful, always looking at the brighter side of things.

"Alright. Hang on" Dr. Montez said. Nothing happened as he looked at a terminal. Elena looked at Riko.

"He's waiting for the last two waves to merge" she whispered to her. Elena made an ah motion with her mouth and just rested there in the pod. A few minutes passed.

"Almostâ€|" Dr. Montez said.

"Almostâ€| done!" he cheered as he looked up at Elena.

"Remember, you have thirty minutes to get in there, and get all six waves to converge together to start thinking in a coordinated effort. After thatâ€| things could go badly. Riko will keep you protected from the AIs" Montez told her. She nodded and felt nervous.

"Calm down, you'll be fine. Just let Riko lead you. Tachi is watching both sides. Don't worry, do this right ok?" Jenny told her. She nodded quickly and breathed.

"Alright. Closing the door" Dr. Montez said. The door closed and the fluid started to raise up. She realized she had no mask to breathe through. Cryo stasis didn't do the fluid, it simply froze over with a special system. This was completely different from what she expected. The fluid was freezing cold, and she shivered as it slowly rose up and over her head. She tried to hold her breath, but she suddenly opened her mouth and it rushed in. She couldn't hear the people outside trying to tell her to calm down and breathe. The fluid went into her lungs and she fought to contain it. They were drowning her.

She banged on the door trying to get out, but they wouldn't stop. She was going to be killed by them. She slowly lost consciousness as she drifted away as the fluid slowly congealed and semi froze.

"Elena, can you hear me?" Riko asked.

"\_Whatâ€| howâ€|" Elena tried to think.\_

"Calm. Just focus. Follow my voice" Riko said softly. She slowly spoke and counted up from one to ten. Elena focused on her voice as she counted and slowly rose from her body.

"I've got a connection" Dr. Montez said.

"\_I've got her" Aaron said and Elena felt a slight tug on her.\_

"\_Who's there?" she asked.\_

"\_It's just me Elena, I'm a friend of Seth's. Don't worry, everything is going to be fine" Aaron told her.\_

"\_I've got the link to the crystal" Thelma told them.\_

"\_I can't move! I can'tâ€¦|" Elena said as she tried to move in one direction but she had no control.\_

"\_Easy. Don't do anything. Let us move you. Where do you want to go?" Aaron asked.\_

"\_I wantâ€¦| I need to get to the crystal right?" Elena asked.\_

"\_Yes. You want me to move you there?" he asked.\_

"\_Yes please" she responded.\_

"\_Alright. Don't worry, this is easy" he told her.\_

Elena now realized just what Seth went through. He saw things like this every time he remote viewed. How he controlled the situation was beyond her. He was incredibly strong to be able to handle this all the time, both in willpower and his mind. She could barely wrap her head around how she could talk to them.

"Alright, connection in two, one" Dr. Montez said.

Elena and Riko both appeared inside the crystal, but what they saw wasn't her house again. They were in a long white corridor with multiple doors on each side. There were branching corridors off from the one they were standing in. Elena looked at Riko and noticed she wasn't see through, and was whole. Riko smiled at her. Elena brought her hand up and touched herself, and then touched Riko. They were both physical.

"This place has laws coded into it to control the environment, allowing similar effects to real life. All senses function similarly to outside the crystal, to hide the fact someone is inside of it. You live a dream reality" Riko told her.

"Ok, alrightâ€¦| uhâ€¦| well, what do we do first?" Elena asked. She didn't know how to help.

"\_You're there, now you just have to find the emanations of the six waves in there. They could be anything Elena. Absolutely anything" Aaron told her.\_

"Great, no pressure" she responded.

"Three minutes past" Dr. Montez told them.

"Shit, ok, the door" Riko cursed and Elena nodded. They opened the first door and found an empty room. They started down each door and met similar circumstances.

"All of these are empty" Elena said.

"\_Must be the old waves merging. Keep going" Thelma told her.\_

Both Riko and Elena ran down a side corridor and continued on.

"Five minutes" Dr. Montez said.

Elena opened a door and suddenly saw a small form run right by her and down the hallway. Both Elena and Riko watched as a small boy ran as fast as he could away from them in white pajamas.

"We need to catch him!" Riko yelled. Both of them ran after him and realized it was a boy version of Seth. He was incredibly fast for his size, and just as Elena tried to grab him, he somersaulted on the ground away from her reach.

"He's nimble!" Riko said surprised. Elena ran and leapt. She jumped and landed on him, and he struggled to get away. He kicked and screamed as she held on tight.

"Easy! Easy! We're not going to hurt you! Calm down!" Elena struggled with him but he was wiggling around so much. She clamped her legs over him and held him down as Riko came up and grabbed him. He screamed and tried to kick and fight them.

"Calm down! Calm down! We're not gonna hurt you! Easy" Elena said as she held him down. He looked at her with fear in his eyes.

"It's ok. Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine. I'm going to let go now ok? Can you stay still?" Elena cooed.

She slowly let go of him as did Riko and he still looked at her with worry.

"Hi! hey, you know me. I won't hurt you. Ok?" she asked and put her hand out. He hesitantly touched her hand and then suddenly hugged her. She held him and brushed her fingers through his hair.

"Everything is going to be ok" she whispered and he looked up and suddenly was fearful again. He pulled away from her and tried to run, but Riko held him back. He screamed and struggled.

"Easy! We're friends!" Elena told her and Riko looked up.

"I don't think he's afraid of us!" Riko whispered as Elena looked behind her. Further down the hallway, a black figure covered in dripping shadows stood there with white glowing eyes. It was twitching in all directions, and hunched over, looking almost avian in how it responded to its surroundings. It took a few steps forward, not really seeing them, but suddenly cocked its head sideways

sickeningly and peered at them. There was a screech that came from it and it charged at them.

**\*\*[Music: Epic Score "OMG Run"]\*\***

"Run!" Elena yelled as Riko even feared it. Riko grabbed little Seth and ran as Elena went with them.

"What the hell is that?" Elena screamed.

"\_It must be a part of Seth's psyche, that part we never really work with because it's the dark part of all of us!" Aaron told her worriedly.\_

"Shit! Is that one of the waves?" Elena yelled as they ran, and the shadowy abomination jumped onto the ceiling and crawled across it quickly towards them. They ran down another corridor as it gave chase.

"It is. You need to get that near the others before anything can happen, and you still need to find the others. Ten minutes have past" Dr. Montez told them.

"Go go go!" Riko yelled as they ran as fast as they could. They entered a room to get away from it and saw the door handle struggle to open from the other side. There was one light hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room and the rest was darkness. They backed away from the door as they heard the screeching and groaning coming from the other side. It wanted in.

Little Seth was almost paralyzed with fear as it clung to Elena. They stood in the light as the door apparently couldn't be opened from the other side by the monstrosity.

"Why can't it get in?" Elena asked.

"\_Each wave is compartmentalized to different parts of the brain, and it wouldn't change in there" Thelma told her.\_

"So, we need each of them to reach each other? How the hell do I do that if they're compartmentalized?" Elena asked.

"\_You got his fear and other affects in that boy in there. It means you can lead them around. You just have to find the right way to do it" Aaron told her.\_

"Great! A fucking puzzle! Just what we need! A jigsaw in under half an hour!" Elena laughed sarcastically and sighed.

"Thirteen minutes" Dr. Montez told them.

"Oh god!" Elena groaned and ran her fingers through her long hair. They heard movement behind them and turned around immediately as the scrambling at the door stopped.

"Who's there?" Elena asked and Riko got between the boy and Elena. More movement from a single source. They backed away from the light and peered into the darkness. In the corner of the room, sat an old man. He was wearing a loin cloth and was sitting with his legs crossed. He looked to be meditating.

"Omâ€| Omâ€|" he seemed to be chanting.

"Hey" Elena said. The chanting stopped. Elena came a bit closer as his eyes shot open and looked at her.

"We need to get you to the others" Elena told him.

"I am the others" he told her in what sounded an ancient voice. Elena cocked her head confused.

"No, you don't understand" Elena started again.

"I understand perfectly. You, however, are clouded" he told her.

"What?" she asked quizzically.

"You do not understand yourself. You are worse than I am. I am complete" he told her.

"No, you aren't, look-" Elena tried to explain.

"How do you think I am not what I am?" he asked.

"Because I know!" Elena almost yelled.

"But how do you?" he asked.

"I justâ€| knowâ€|" she told him. She didn't know how to explain he wasn't real, just a brain wave of Seth.

"As I know that I am complete and understand myself. I simply know. You do not. Why?" he told her.

"I don't know why. Uncertainty is normal in what I do, and how I live" she told him.

"But uncertainty can lead to more problems than you can imagine. Certainty is needed to move forward, but you will find it together. Uncertainty will hold you back, and you will do it alone" he told her. He moved forward a bit in the light, and Elena could see it was a far far older Seth. His hair was white and matted down behind him, and he seemed to almost exhume wisdom from his body.

He reached towards her face and she hesitated, but then realized he was in fact just part of Seth, and more than likely wouldn't hurt her. She moved forward and let him touch her face gently. He ran his rough fingers carefully around her face, towards her cheeks, as he peered into her eyes and searched.

"Certainty will not come to you for a short time. Much pain will be felt until then. Of this, I cannot tell you" he said quietly. Runes and archaic symbols started to glow along the walls suddenly. She looked around as he continued staring at her.

"Can I at least be certain you will come with us?" Elena asked.

"I will follow, but you must learn to follow first. Only then can you lead" he told her. Elena looked at Riko.

"Some sort of Zen mind thing. I don't know" Riko told her.

"\_Elena, he's saying you have to follow someone first before you can start leading" Aaron told her.\_

"I know that! But who?" Elena asked.

"Fifteen minutes" Dr. Montez said.

"Damn itâ€¦ heyâ€¦ hey heyâ€¦" Elena suddenly had an epiphany. The old man looked at her.

"Would you be so kind as to show us to the others doors?" Elena asked. He nodded and got up.

"Follow and then lead" Riko whispered. They peeked out of the door and saw that the abomination was gone. They opened the door and crept out as the old man just waddled out and walked down the hallway. They followed as they reached another door and he just stood there.

"Oh, right, I have to open the door" she said.

"Lead" he replied. She opened the door and inside was a man looking like a completely nerdy version of Seth writing furiously on a white board with multiple equations. Riko giggled at the equation in the upper left corner.

"What?" Elena asked.

"It's the equation. And god saidâ€¦" Riko whispered to her. Elena saw the huge amount of writing under it.

"And there was light" Riko giggled. Elena stifled a giggle.

"Please quiet!" the man said as he continued to write away.

"No, please, we don't have time for this" Elena said.

"I need silence or I cannot work!" he growled at them annoyed.

"What are you doing though? We might help" Elena said.

"You? Preposterous! Do you have doctorate in Phasic Quantum Physics? No? I thought not" he chuckled and sneered at her.

"Wow, he's an ass" Elena whispered.

"\_He's not hindered by a conscience Elena. This is the analytical side of him, all of the training and education he's had" Thelma said.\_

Riko walked up to the whiteboard.

"Hey! Don't touch that! I'm still working out the theorem!" he said and pushed her away.

"Excuse me? What theorem?" she asked.

"Black hole transference" he said proudly.



"Meaning? What, worm hole connections or data shearing resonance?" Riko asked.

"Well, both of course!" he scoffed.

"So you're not actually working on an equation that mixed them both or you wouldn't have this" she said and wiped away a piece of the whiteboard.

"Don't don't don't!" he screamed and tried to stop her by standing behind her and waving his hands around, hoping she'd back off.

"My equations!" he screamed and grabbed at his head.

"You're equations are faulty" Riko told him.

"And how would you know that?" he yelled at her.

"Because you're doing it in the wrong room" Elena told him. Riko looked at her, and so did he.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"You're in the wrong room. The answer was in the last room we were just in, right Riko?" she said.

"Of course, yes, it was in the other room" Riko said.

"Well, you could have just told me that in the first place and saved me the trouble of talking to the likes of you!" he growled.

"\_Remember, he is unhindered by conscience, he doesn't actually mean it Elena" Aaron chuckled.\_

"Still an ass" Elena growled.

"Show me this room at once!" the scientist demanded. Elena looked to the old man and he walked out.

"Twenty minutes" Dr. Montez said.

"Shitâ€¦!" Elena whispered. The old man waddled down the hallway to another room. She opened it and inside was what seemed to be a Knight. He just stood there, motionless.

"A Knight?" Elena asked.

"Were you expecting a ninja?" Riko asked. Elena thought for a moment.

"Actually?" she said smiling.

"Don't" Riko chuckled.

The Knight stayed motionless with his sword tip pressed against the floor. He was standing over it with both of his hands resting on the pommel and a tower shields attached to his left arm. He was massive.

"Hello?" Elena asked. He didn't respond.

"\_Chivalry maybe?" Aaron asked.\_

"\_No, it isn't responding to Elena. Loyalty. Strength, Honor" Thelma commented.\_

The Knight was huge, easily dwarfing them. It looked futuristic, as the armor didn't look so much old fashioned but built to look knightly. Parts of it looked similar to a Spartans greaves. The sword glowed with power. He still stood inert.

"Can you hear us?" Elena asked. The man still stood there with his hands on the pommel.

"Wait, maybe he reacts only to violence?" Riko asked. Elena looked at her.

"Don't even try it, I don't doubt he'd probably knock you across the hallway" Elena warned her.

"Me? Are you kidding? Please, he couldn't possibly-" she said as she walked forward and was about to slap the helmet when she saw the eyes had moved inside and stared at her. Riko suddenly stopped mid swing.

"I take it back, this is his mind we're talking about, he might just be able to" Riko corrected herself.

"We need your help" Elena told him. No response.

"Does he even speak?" Riko asked.

"Finally, someone who is subservient" the scientist said.

"Speech beyond words" the old man commented.

"Wait, violence right?" Elena asked.

"Yeah?" Riko said looking at her.

"We'll come back to him. We need another" Elena said.

"Hey! You said we were going to the room that had the answer to my question!" the scientist snapped.

"We are. We just had to stop here. This is the answer here. Stay here" Elena said.

"With pleasure if it means you two don't bother me again" he grumbled and walked in and looked at the walls.

"Seriously? We leave them here?" Riko asked.

"Better than having him go to the next room and want to stay there away from the Knight. He can probably protect him" Elena told her.

"Twenty three minutes" Dr. Montez said.

"Sir? Could you take us to the next room?" Elena asked. The old man waddled off and they followed, and he pointed at a door.

"Wonder what's behind door number six?" Riko asked.

"We'll soon find out" she replied. Elena opened it up and found a comedy room.

"So he just yelled out "PENIS!" and the whole place just raised themselves up!" A man said as he was smiling and talking on a microphone.

"I don't even want to know" Riko grumbled.

"Humor? Cheerfulness? Happiness?" Elena questioned.

"Well well! We have some fresh blood in here! Hey there pretty lady! How about you answer some of my riddles?" the man asked. He was wearing a night jacket with black chinos and shined dress shoes. He had on a bowtie and the jacket was purple. His hair was slicked back.

"What do I get out of it if I respond?" Elena asked.

"What would you like madmazel? A little fun after?" he said giggling.

"You follow us if I win" she said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Oh, I'd love to do that! With an ass like that, yes indeedy feed the needy! Here are the rules, you answer three of my riddles, and I'll follow that cute rear of yours wherever you want to go! If you don't answer within thirty seconds, oh, it means you fail" he told her. She grumbled something. She didn't like when someone treated her like a piece of meat. Seth never did that.

"Alright, shoot" Elena said.

"Great! First riddle! Mr. and Mrs. Smith were walking home from the shopping mall with their purchases when Mrs Smith began to complain that his load was too heavy. Mrs. Smith turned to her husband and said "I don't know what you're complaining about because if you gave me one of your parcels I would have twice as many as you, and if I gave you just one of mine, we would have equal loads. How many parcels was each carrying?" the man asked.

"Twenty five minutes" Dr. Montez said.

"Mrs. Smith was carrying seven parcels, and Mr. Smith was carrying five" Elena told him.

"Correct! Second riddle! For some I go fast, for others I'm slow, to most people I'm an obsession, relying on me is a well-practiced lesson. What am I?" he asked. Elena smirked.

"Time" she groaned.

"Correct! You're pretty good at this darling! Third riddle! A blue

house is made of blue bricks, and yellow house is made of yellow bricks, and a red house is made of red bricks. An orange house is made of orange bricks, so what would a green house be made of?" the man asked.

"Glass" Elena told him annoyed.

"Three riddles! Incredible folks! We have a winner! Sure thing honey! I'll follow you wherever you wanna go! Wanna come back with me into the back room huh huh?" he said to her with a goofy smile on his face hoping he'd get some.

"Follow me, I'm bored" Elena grumbled. She realized Seth had never, ever used bad jokes like this before. Every time he made a joke she literally split her sides and couldn't breathe. He watched what he said for the most part.

"Twenty seven minutes" Dr. Montez said through gritted teeth.

"Shit, we gotta go" Elena said and Riko nodded. They ran down the hallway and heard a screech coming from further down a corridor.

"Shit, it's that thing again!" Elena groaned. She looked over her shoulder and saw the thing climbing the ceiling to get near them.

"Run!" Riko yelled as they ran towards the room they were just in with the Knight. They reached it just as the thing leapt onto Elena's back and knocked her through the door sliding. It was about to bite into her neck when the Knight woke up and slammed its shield into the monstrosity. Elena backed away as all of them were in the same place.

"Twenty nine minutes!" Dr. Montez started raise his voice.

"What do I do?" Elena yelled.

"\_You need to get them to react in the same way! Do something to make them all respond!" Aaron told her.\_

"What though!" Elena yelled.

"\_Anything!" Thelma told her.\_

Elena figured she'd do something she might never hear the end of.

"HEY ALL OF YOU!" She yelled and lifted her shirt and her bra and flashed them. It was in the crystal, so it didn't really matter. The knight was already facing her with his blade pointed towards the monstrosity on the ground, and everyone looked at her. The room flashed brightly as everything died away in blinding light.

"Thirty minutes! We need to pull you out!" Dr. Montez said. Suddenly, the area changed, and they were in front of her house again in the hallway. The three AIs were still standing there. Seth was flung across the room, complete now, and slammed into the wall. He fell onto the ground, not moving.

"Get him! I'll handle these bastards!" Riko growled and leapt at the first one and slammed her fist into it. She made it gurgle as the second one grabbed her and slammed her into the wall, but she broke away and snapped its arm. The third struck her in the face as she winced. They were attacking her as well, trying to scramble her code. Elena ran to Seth lying on the floor, not moving.

"Thirty minutes Elena! We have to pull you out now!" Dr. Montez yelled.

"NO! I almost have him! Give me a minute! That's all I'm asking!" Elena yelled. She started to drag him back as Riko held the line, taking hits and delivering them. Blood was drooling from her mouth as she was taking a beating from not one, but three other AIs combining their strength to take her down. She swept one of their legs and knocked it to the ground, but one got her in a headlock and started beating down on her head. She broke away dazed and picked up the couch and slammed it into them, keeping them back. Elena nearly had Seth to the door as Riko wobbled towards them.

"We're almost there!" Elena told him.

"Thirty one minutes! Jesus!" Dr. Montez said as he looked at Jenny. Jenny looked at her vitals.

"She needs to get out of there right now!" Jenny yelled him.

"Elena we need to jettison you now!" Dr. Montez yelled.

"No! Just a few more seconds!" she cried and nearly had him through the door. Riko was hot on their heels, but then the unfortunate happened. The AIs had pulled the couch away and grabbed Riko's leg. They dropped her to the floor and tried to step on her.

"Go! I've got this!" Riko yelled. Elena watched her as the other two came down on her and beat her into the ground.

"Riko!" Elena screamed as one of them pinned her to the ground while the third grabbed her arm and twisted it. They heard a snap and Riko screamed in pain.

"Go!" she screamed with tears in her eyes "go!" she cried as the third ripped her arm completely out of the socket. Elena pulled Seth fully through the door just as Riko smiled and seemed to detonate, destroying the three AIs around her. With a flash of light, the whole place disappeared.

"Jettison now!" Dr. Montez yelled as the nurses and technicians ejected the door and the fluid fell out. Elena went with it as she slid along the ground on a small wave. They picked her up and injected her with warm up drugs and then put her on a medical bed near Seth. The large crystal shattered into pieces from whatever Riko did.

"Come on, breathe!" Jenny growled as Elena lay there, motionless. They started pushing down on her chest to get the fluid to come out, and she finally after a minute of the movements coughed. Seth slowly woke up and blinked as he looked around. Elena opened her eyes wearily as she looked left at him. He looked at her and gawked.

"She's still coldâ€¦ get the tubes" Jenny yelled as the nurses ran to grab heated blankets and small tubes to place near her. They heated the medical bed quickly and wrapped her up. Jenny checked her vitals as she was shivering.

"Elena?" Seth asked worriedly.

"I'm here" she whispered as she shivered.

"Hypothermia has kicked in!" Jenny snapped as they rubbed a small balm over her lips and placed a warmed up rock like object in her mouth. They wiped her off carefully as she slowly warmed up.

"She's doing good! Vitals are looking clean!" Jenny said as Dr. Montez checked her heart.

"You're going to be alright Elena" Dr. Montez told her. She just kept looking at Seth as he lay there staring at her.

"Saved my bacon" he whispered and smiled. She smiled back and tried to move. Something was wrong with her legs.

"Elena, what are you doing?" Dr. Montez asked as she tried to roll.

"I can'tâ€¦ I can't move my legsâ€¦" she told him after spitting out the rock and looked confused. She tried to tell her legs to move but they wouldn't respond.

"I can't move my legsâ€¦ I can't move them!" she started to panic.

"Easy, easy. Stay still. Calm down. Jenny, check her spine" Dr. Montez told her and threw her a medical glove. Jenny put it on quickly and rolled it up and down Elena's neck and then down her spine. They got a beep. Jenny sat there with the glove pressed against the small of her back.

"Can you feel this?" Jenny asked. Elena nodded.

"Get me Terazinyne! 50cc" Jenny told another nurse. They grabbed a small syringe and handed it to Jenny. She inserted it into her back and pushed the serum in.

"Do your legs feel numb or-" Jenny started to say.

"I can't feel anything from them! Oh godâ€¦ oh noâ€¦" she really was panicking. Seth was worried about what was happening and he tried to get up but a nurse kept him down. He would barely know how to handle this other than hold her hand.

"We need to get her to the medical ward, we don't have the equipment in here for this" Jenny told Dr. Montez.

"Alright people, we're moving her!" Montez yelled and they wheeled her away. Seth reached for Elena's hand as she just watched him fade away through DECON.

"I need to go with her!" Seth snapped.

"You need to rest sir" the nurse behind him said and suddenly felt four pricks against his arms. He felt drowsy but he tried to fight it. Two guards came up and pressed him down.

"Easy, easy" they said and he slowly faded to sleeping.

**\*\*[Eight hours later]\*\***

Seth woke up in his quarters. He looked around and a nurse was sitting at his desk.

"Sir, take it easy" he said and put his hands up in surrender.

"Where's Elena?" he growled.

"She's in the medical ward. You can see her if you-" he started.

"Pal, I am not in the mood to hear this bullshit! I'm going there! You will get out of my way if you don't want to be flattened against the wall!" he growled. The nurse backed off as he put his clothes on and walked through the door. He jogged down the hallway and to the medical bay. As the doors opened, he was greeted by Dr. Montez.

"Calm down, calm down" he said and kept Seth from running into Elena's room. She was lying in a medical bed looking away from the door. She looked like she had been crying.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Seth asked sternly.

"Your mind was fragmented Seth, we waited for-" Montez started to explain.

"I know what fucking happened! I was there! I could hear everything I just couldn't figure out what it meant until now! I saw it! Tell me what happened to her!" Seth roared at him.

"The maximum time she should have been in the pod was thirty minutes. She was in it for thirty two minutes, two minutes longer than she should have. We warned something might happen. This happened" Dr. Montez said and motioned to Elena. She still didn't look their way.

"What? Details Antonio!" Seth growled.

"Her spine was damaged by a form of frostbite to the lumbar vertebrae region. She can't move her legs" Dr. Montez told him softly. Seth was stunned. She was a paraplegic.

"So, you can fix that right?" he asked.

"Seth, sit down please" Dr. Montez told him quietly. Seth sat down in a chair as Antonio did as well.

"The nervous system beyond the neck is quite difficult to respond to. Even with current medical technology, we still have problems rebuilding or repairing anything to do with the spine. Anything done

poorly and it can do more harm than good. It's a very balanced part of the body. She might be able to get medical treatment over a period of time, but unless she can get constant spinal therapy over the course of the next decade, she'sâ€¦" Montez trailed off.

"Next decade?â€¦ no no no, there's got to be a way, damn it, she doesn't deserve that! There's gotta be something we can do!" he told him.

"I don't know how Seth. You know me. If you have an idea, I am all ears my friend. Truly, I would love for her to get up and walk again. But unless she receives constant therapy over a long period of timeâ€¦ hell, that might not even work" Montez told him. Seth looked through the glass window at Elena. She looked so depressed laying there, handicapped.

"I can go in and see her right?" Seth asked.

"Yes of course" Dr. Montez told him. He got up and went towards the door.

"Seth?" Montez asked. Seth turned around.

"I really am sorry. I warned her we needed to get her out. We could have waited until after she was back out to try again once your mind was complete. You might have been stuck in the crystal temporarily, but it would have been better thanâ€¦ thisâ€¦" he told him softly. Seth nodded slowly and looked back through the door. He walked through and sat down slowly, looking at Elena.

"Hey" he said quietly. She blinked and looked over at him. She looked so pitiful. He wanted to just hug her close and never let go.

"I tried. We got you out. I guess I wasn't as good as you are at that. I figured I wouldn't be" she hoarsely told him.

"Hey, you were awesome. I heard you. I heard everything, I justâ€¦ didn't understand it until I was back together" he told her and held her hand gently.

"This is all my fault" she told him. He looked confused.

"What? No, don't worry, it isn't. We'll figure out something to fix this, I promise" he told her and squeezed her hand gently.

"No, it is. I deserve this" she told him.

"What? No, you don't. That's wrong and you know it" he said worriedly.

"Seth, everything that's happened, has had my influence on it the entire time you've been with me. I've put you through hell ever since you met me" she told him as guilt filled her eyes.

"No, you were the greatest thing I had around me when we were younger. You made me try to excel to be better than I was" he told her.

"Wrong. Dr. Wright showed me his files. When you were six, he was going to use you to improve flight of fighters that I flew, act as a



defense against attacks. You were just a system. You were always thisâ€¦ thing to him. And when we were teenagers, I justâ€¦ I used you Seth. I didn't mean to, but I used you without knowing it" she explained and started to cry.

"Hey, shhhh, calm down, no you didn't, you didn't do anything wrong" he said and tried to hug her but she pulled away from him.

"No! I did! And even now I screwed it up when it came to you! Everything I do seems to throw more crap your way! Every time! No matter what happens! I don't want that anymore! I don't want to hurt you anymore!" she cried to him. He looked confused, trying to figure out what she was saying as his mouth opened to say something but he couldn't figure out what.

"Wait, whaâ€¦ howâ€¦ what are you saying Elena?" he asked softly.

"I'm saying it's done for good! I saw the footage! I know you were loyal! And I still treated you like shit! I am so sorry! I shouldn't have even come close to that! I swore I would change and never act like that again, but nowâ€¦ I think you'd be better off with someone else than me" she told him with tears falling down her face.

"Wait, no, you said a while ago that this was going to work, and you made me promise I would never disappear again. You can't just-" Seth started to say.

"I have to! The next time I do something it could kill you! I can't let that happen! It's better this way! Trust me!" she said as she pulled her hand away from his grasp. He looked down at her hand and tried to reach for it, but she put it on the other side of her body.

"Elena, don't do this, I swore I wouldn't give up, and I won't. Damn it, stop this!" he said sternly.

"Seth, sometimes you love someone enough to let them go. I'm doing that now, to keep you safe from me" she told him softly.

"What about your legs? Come on, you're not thinking clearly, who's gonna take care of you?" he asked.

"I'll more than likely get an honorable discharge or continue on the ship as a General. My mother and father I hope will help me out if I do get discharged, considering I can'tâ€¦ I can'tâ€¦" she couldn't bring herself to say it. She couldn't move her legs.

"Elenaâ€¦" Seth quietly said and tried to put his hand on her shoulder.

"Go" she cried softly.

"What?" he asked.

"Go!" she snapped and looked at him with pain in her eyes.

"No, no, I'm not leaving, I promised I'd stay, come on just-" Seth started to say.

"I SAID GO! JUST GO DAMN IT! DON'T BE NEAR ME! LEAVE! STAY AWAY FOREVER!" She cried out and he backed off. He looked at her as she cried and rolled her head away from him. He sighed out a breath and backed out of her room. He slowly walked towards the door to the medical bay and took one last look at her through the window. She was still crying, and didn't look back.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He walked out of the room and let the doors close behind him.

"Soâ€¦ that's it then?" Dr. Montez asked.

"It's what she seems to want" Seth replied quietly.

"I'm sorry my friend" Montez said and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I just feel so helpless. I promised herâ€¦ and she justâ€¦" Seth trailed off.

"Sometimes the only thing both of you can do is move on. It might be best for her and you to do that" Montez told him.

"Yeah, move on. Certainty right?" he asked.

"Yesâ€¦ what?" Dr. Montez asked.

"Nevermind. I understand. I hate it, but I understand" Seth said and took a deep breath. He felt like crying too, but he couldn't, not right now. He was just officially told to leave alone the woman of his dreams, who still loved him. If he didn't, she felt it could kill him.

"There is one other thing I need to tell you" Dr. Montez told him. Seth looked up at him.

"Rikoâ€¦ she'sâ€¦" he couldn't finish.

"Noâ€¦ no no no, she couldn't be! NO!" Seth looked horrified. Riko was gone. She had sacrificed herself against three AIs. Against one she would have won, but she was being hammered by three Precursor attack AIs at the same time.

"How could that happen?" Seth asked as he brought his hands to his forehead.

"She engaged her kill code and infected the other AIs with it at the same time. She went down fighting" Dr. Montez told him. Seth's best friend was dead, or scrambled code. She was no longer an AI, just a heap of corrupted code and fragmentary data. Dr. Montez pulled out her data chip, a small purplish crystal wafer held in a titanium encasement. The crystal wasn't glowing, and there was a large crack running through the middle of it.

"She looked out for Elena to the end, like you made her promise" Montez told him.

"I needâ€¦ I need a bit of time aloneâ€¦ I justâ€¦ I need to think things through you know? A few too many things happening in one day man, thanks" he said and tears were boiling up in his eyes. Dr.

Montez nodded and Seth walked back to his quarters and just sat there. The nurse had left the room already, and he was alone. He just stared at the crystal in his hands, the dead friend. He had just lost his girlfriend because she feared for his safety when he was near her, and now his best friend was gone. His day had just turned to absolute shit. He pressed a button on his terminal after an hour of crying.

"Seth, I guess the operation was a success. Good to see you back on your feet" Metfield said.

"Yeah boss, I'm just peachy" he said as he sniffled.

"Something wrong son? You look like shit, but that's a given after what you just went through. You'll be right as rain soon enough" Metfield smiled.

"Not this time, but eventually. Iâ€¦ I need a favor" Seth told him.

"What's up?" Metfield asked.

"I need you to get all the data on Neural Physics and send it my way. I need the pod transferred as well, off this ship. I don't think I'm need here anymore. Elena and Iâ€¦ well, she doesn't want me around anymore" he told him.

"I'm sorry to hear that Seth. You twoâ€¦ hard to believe" Metfield said quietly.

"Yeah, well, things happen right? I think a lot of things happen, I just had to wait until she's ready you know?" Seth said.

"Ready? Ready for what?" Metfield asked.

"Certainty, but before that I have one last thing I have to do for her, and that's why I need the data on Neural Physics. I'm gonna fix her spine for her, one way or another" Seth told him. Metfield smiled.

"Good luck. Coordinates for the base you'll be at are sent, you head out by the end of the day" Metfield smiled.

"Yeah, thanks boss" Seth chuckled but was still sniffing.

"Your future doesn't look so bad if this is how it's gonna work Seth. Are you sure?" Metfield asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure" Seth responded. Things were going to change for him and Elena, for better or worse.

## 17. Almost Lover

\*\*[1000 hours, May 5\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, UNSC Infinity class carrier \*\*\_\*\*Conundrum\*\*\_\*\*]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Kelly Clarkson â€" Already Gone]\*\*

Elena was released from the medical bay and was wheeled away in a

standard wheelchair. She looked extremely depressed as the nurse moved her down the hallway and towards the hangar. Her father and brother were taking her down to San Francisco to see her mother and explain what was happening. The fleet was in full repairs after its massive battle, as almost half of it was wiped out, both UNSC and Sangheili.

She looked like an old woman, not caring about what was going on around her. They wheeled her into the hangar and stopped her with the brakes. Her father and brother walked and knelt nearby.

"Hey sweet heart, how are you feeling?" Jack asked. Elena didn't respond, she just blinked and looked at the ground.

"We're gonna get you home ok? Don't worry, everything is gonna be fine" he cooed. She looked up at him and he could tell she just felt like dying. Every dream she had was shattered. Her legs couldn't move at all, though she could feel everything near the waist and her skin, she couldn't send signals to her legs to work. All organs were fine apparently, and she could use the restroom and control her muscles well enough. She just couldn't walk. She couldn't dance ever again, couldn't fly, and couldn't move around without mechanical assistance or someone pushing her. She was stuck.

Milo had her luggage and had started storing it as Jack came behind her and unlocked the brakes. He moved her towards the pelican and then stopped. They both saw the last GRID pelican leave the same hangar and head out, with the RORO closing. Inside, just before it latched and sealed, they saw Seth sitting down and looking at her. He didn't even say goodbye. Elena felt like crying right at that moment, as she had just broke up with him. She didn't want him to be hurt anymore because of her in any way. The GRID pelican headed out and towards the planet, as Aurora actually came out to escort pelicans along.

"We should get you situated" Jack said softly and pushed Elena up the RORO and latched her in the cargo hold. Her wheelchair couldn't fit through the cockpit door. Jack strapped the chair down and headed to the cockpit as Milo sat down in another seat and watched Elena. She looked broken, with no hope. The RORO closed up as Jack started up the pelican and headed out along with the GRID pelicans. Aurora flew nearby.

"Elena, someone's calling you" Jack said over the intercom. Elena slowly looked up.

"Hey, General, it's me. I know this is the last voice you'd probably want to hear, but I just hope everything works out for you. I know you'll find the strength to move forward" Aurora said over the coms. Even someone she thought was mean had done a 180 and wished her the best.

"We're heading through the atmosphere. Thanks for the escort" Jack responded.

"Copy, the other pelicans areâ€¦| areâ€¦|" Aurora trailed off.

"Holyâ€¦| they just stealthed and active camo'dâ€¦| whoaâ€¦|" Jack said as they went through the atmosphere, invisible objects suddenly

showing fireballs around them, and then nothing after. They were heading to a secure location, unknown by anyone except them.

"It's really happened. He's gone" Aurora whispered. Elena winced at hearing that over the coms as she now knew Seth had disappeared. Aurora signed off and Jack slipped through the atmosphere and headed to Vandenberg AFB. They landed and Jack and Milo unstrapped Elena's wheelchair from the cargo hold and wheeled her out. A limo was waiting for them and carried their luggage and put it in the trunk. They lifted Elena and put her inside the back seats and then folded her wheelchair and stored it as well. Jack and Milo got inside near her as the limo drove towards San Francisco with an escort.

Elena watched from a window as they headed down the highway towards her mother's home. She didn't say anything to anyone. Milo gave his father a worried look as Jack picked up a bottle of water from a small fridge in the side and opened it, and then tried to get Elena to drink. She ignored it as she sat there.

"You gotta drink something hon" Jack said in a fatherly tone. She slowly looked down at it and took the bottle in her hand and sipped a bit, and then screwed the top back on. She then continued to look out of the window.

They reached the house and pulled up as her mother was literally waiting there, as was Amber and Marcus. They looked so saddened by Elena's state as she was lifted out and put in her wheelchair and pushed up the wooden makeshift ramps over the steps and into the house.

"Oh my babyâ€¦ my sweet girlâ€¦ everything is going to be fineâ€¦" Elizabeth almost cried as she hugged her daughter's head to her chest. They got the luggage in and Marcus and Amber stayed with Elena the entire time. She barely spoke as everyone came inside and sat down. Everyone else had a conversation involving what was going on, though it was very somber.

"I can make breakfast for everyone, we could-" Elizabeth started but Jack shook his head towards her. Elena didn't eat much for the past day.

"Um, I have something to help Elena in this difficult time, if I may. It will be usefulâ€¦ in her current conditionâ€¦" Marcus told them. He walked out to the garage and held a small key FOB and drove what looked like a modified HAMMER drone designed with a chair in mind.

"It's entirely stair capable, turns on a dime, rugged and capable of moving almost as fast as a warthog. Don't let that give you any ideas" Marcus said. Everyone chuckled a bit at that. Elena touched it gently.

"This is what I'm reduced to" she hoarsely said after so much crying. Everyone looked at each other awkwardly as they didn't know what to say.

"You gotta stay strong honey, things will change, just you wait. Keep hope alright?" Elizabeth told her. Elena closed her eyes for a few seconds and nodded.

"Alright, wellâ€¦" Elizabeth trailed off and looked at Jack.

"We've got some choices on how things will work Elena. We're more than willing to have you stay here in your room until you decide otherwise. Later, it is entirely possible for you to head out on your own. With the amount of money you've been saving up from the military pay as well as royalties from the HAMMER drone, not to mention medical penchant and hazard pay, you have more than enough to live comfortably without working at all, if you desire toâ€¦ leave the UNSCâ€¦" Jack told her softly.

"Move out? Rightâ€¦ I shouldn't bother anybody elseâ€¦" Elena almost whispered.

"What? No, no that's not what we meant. Wheelchair bound people can live normal lives just like anyone else, they just live in a slightly different way. Ramps to their homes, no stairs or very few, they tend to have friends or family bring in anything that they need carried. They still lead active lives sweet heart" Jack tried to explain.

"Except I can't dance anymore, I just gave up my boyfriend so he couldn't be hurt, and my entire career is in jeopardy because I can't fly anymore" Elena replied. Jack was about to say something else but his mouth closed. It wouldn't have mattered.

"Let's get you situated ok?" Elizabeth asked and they got up and lifted her into the TNK chair so she could test it out. She moved the switch and it pushed forward on its treads, and she slowly went up the stairs with everyone nearby her, making sure she did it slowly. Despite the treads being strong and large, they were very easy on the carpeting and the walls if the rubber touched, and the chair rotated with a gyro stabilizer to keep her level with the ground at all times. She reached the second floor and rotated as Marcus kept in front of her helping her maneuver.

They got her into her room as the treads actually changed positions under the seat to fit through smaller areas, and she rolled in. She turned it around and everyone cheered. She didn't.

"Come on, things will look up" Elizabeth told her softly and stroked her hair. Elena just sat there, not responding.

"We'll visit a lot more often ok?" Amber told her and Marcus nodded.

"Thank you for the gift Marcus, I'm sure she's thankful as well, right Elena?" Elizabeth asked. Elena looked up at Marcus and nodded.

"Thanks" she said quietly.

"Let me know if you need any adjustments to it, though it's doubtful with the adaptive connections. There's a pack on the back, and under, and a cup holder, andâ€¦" Marcus trailed off as he saw that what he was explaining was turning Elena into an invalid. It made her no longer look like the strong smart beautiful woman she was and into this depressed handicapped shadow of her former self. They all knew things were probably looking extremely bleak to her. Everything she loved was gone except for her family and friends.

"Hey, let's rent a movie tonight? Or right now. Come on, let's do it" Amber said.

"That's a great idea. What do you say Elena?" Elizabeth asked.

"Sure" she said flatly. They led Elena down the stairs again until she got used to maneuvering the TNK chair and sat her next to the couch. They were going to do their utmost to keep her occupied while she was there, to get her mind off of things.

\*\*[1120 hours, May 10\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Unknown location, SRI-2 THETA]\*\*

"\_Test commencing" Seth said.\_

"\_Safety watch up, I'm on the rim" Aaron reported.\_

"Power stable, we're tracking the spikes" Dr. Montez told them.

"Routing blueprints. Test four ready" Tachi said.

"\_Alright, creation matrices point at coordinates in five, four, three, two, one" Seth counted down.\_

There was a bright flash as the coordinates burned with energy as something slowly materialized. It was barely visible, but it was there. It was slowly coming together in an odd form, before suddenly the object fluxed.

"\_It's unstable again Seth! Can it and back off!" Aaron told him.\_

"\_Yeah I see it! Canning the test!" Seth exclaimed and the test stopped.\_

The objects shattered into a shimmer of little lights, winking and glimmering as they faded away.

"Test four failure" Dr. Montez sighed.

"Shit" Marvin said nearby as he took off his helmet rig. Marvin was the lead mechanical engineer for their Skunk Works, and was constantly working on blueprints for all sorts of needs used by GRID. One of them, after Tachi sorted through the Precursor intel, was a neuron repair system rig. They had adapted the thing with human technology, but the requirements for it would have cost billions of credits and resources they didn't have available at the moment, very difficult to obtain materials. So, Seth was attempting to test Neural Physics similar to the Precursors to attempt to make it. If he succeeded, the neuron repair system, what looked similar to an MRI unit with multiple robotic arms, would insert multiple hypo shots along the neck, spine, and any other part of the nervous system with adapted nanites.

The nanites were capable of repairing anything in the body, regardless of what it was, as long as they were fed the resources to do it. Due to their size, previous nanites would fail and drain their

power within five minutes of being injected, and were mostly used for placing already pre-fabricated pieces like cloned organs or cloned replacement bones for areas. The amount of work required on a nervous system or muscle tissue was almost impossible without a constant energy supply and quick resource transfer. The repair system was capable of beaming the energy to the nanites without cooking the tissue of the human it was passing the energy through. This system would revolutionize healing of the body, if Seth could get it to solidify. So far, no success.

"God damn it! Why can't we get this thing to work? Seth?" Marvin asked.

"\_I'm sorry man, I'm trying, I justâ€¦ I don't have a stable matrices. Tachi, you wouldn't know what the problem is would you?" Seth asked.\_

"I've been looking over the data. It's peculiar, it doesn't fully explain how the Neural Physics works, simply they had a great deal of energy provided to them and simplyâ€¦ used it with their minds" Tachi told him.

"\_What, I've got to have a near death experience by draining myself and the nutrient tanks as well just to get this thing to form? That's ludicrous! I'd barely be able to contain the thing for more than five minutes, the same time frame of normal nanites!" Seth growled.\_

"I'm not the one you should be angry at Seth" Tachi told with a lilt to his voice.

"\_I know I know, shitâ€¦ I gotta do this though. How else can we get this to work? Can't I feed off from the reactors in some form? Is there any data on draining power from another source?" Seth asked.\_

"There seems to be nothing about thatâ€¦ remember, this was done from their minds to materialize something they can use. From the looks of it, they don't have remote viewers. They're brains must be incredibly sophisticated to handle this, and maybe their metabolisms allow them to produce more energy than you can" Tachi explained.

"\_Great, so we're trying to do stuff we shouldn't be able to handleâ€¦ and we're doing stuff they can't handle. At least we get points for that" Aaron grumbled.\_

"\_No kidding right?" Seth replied.\_

"Alright, come back in, we'll figure this out" Dr. Montez explained.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Seth sat at the small table with Dr. Montez and Aaron. Seth was transferred to Aaron's facility temporarily, and was definitely welcome. Aaron was a good friend, and they helped each other often. They were pouring over data pads as Tachi read through more data.

"What are we missing? More energy right? How do we get that?" Seth asked.



"A new nutrient solution maybe? A faster absorbed metabolite that can be burned through the body quicker?" Dr. Montez asked.

"That could take years Doc. What about the modifications to the pod to keep us from burn out?" Aaron asked, talking about eating their bodies alive from the inside and draining all nutrients from their bodies.

"No, that could take equally as longâ€¦" Seth grumbled. They sat there looking at the pads and Seth just happened to look over at his personal data pad. He still had a picture of Elena smiling as a background. He thought for a moment as everything rushed back to him about his time with her. He missed her a lot. He thought back to what had happened and how she had rescued him, how his mind was fragmented and she pieced it back together.

Seth suddenly had an epiphany.

"Heyâ€¦ hey hey hey, you explained what happened when my mind fragmented right?" Seth asked.

"What? What are you talking about?" Dr. Montez asked.

"About the power spikes! Think about it! Maybeâ€¦ maybe if I could get that to happen and control it, I could channel it into working this!" Seth exclaimed. Dr. Montez looked at Aaron.

"Seth, no, we can't let that happen again" Aaron told him.

"No no no, you don't understand. Look at the circumstances. Age six, I was deathly afraid of needles and kidnapped. Blew the base right up, turned it into ground zero. I pieced myself back together on my own. Second time, odd circumstances, stuck in a crystal, she pieced me together because the AIs were more than likely-" Seth explained.

"Were more than likely keeping your mind fragmented. No wonder it took so long to rebuildâ€¦ my godâ€¦ if Elena hadn't come back to get you out, you would have been just multiple brain wavesâ€¦ but what if the AIs were attacked before?" Dr. Montez asked and they each looked at each other.

"What's happened has happened, Riko isn'tâ€¦ she isn't around anymoreâ€¦ and this is how it is" Seth told them quietly and cast his view away from them.

"Fucking hell, Seth, you can do it at will if you found the catalyst! It isn't a problem, it's a defensive maneuver of your body! Your mind! If you can somehow channel it when your mind fragments and rebuilds, soak it up somehow and contain it, you could easily do the Neural Physics! The question is simply controlling the energy!" Aaron said astonished.

"But how long for his mind to rebuild?" Dr. Montez asked.

"Look at the time frame it took me when I was six. The base blew, I crawled out of the crater after" Seth said and pointed to the file.

"Yeah, you were a drone Seth, you were on autopilot" Dr. Montez explained. Seth shook his head while he talked.

"No, you don't understand, I just wanted to get away. My mind wasn't fragmented then! I was a kid Antonio! I just wanted to get home and was afraid! Wouldn't your mind be stuck on autopilot after something like that?" he asked. Montez thought for a second and nodded.

"Yeah, I would actually" he responded.

"So, what, it takesâ€¦ less than a minute right? Soâ€¦ I need that video feed from Agent Spring" Seth told them.

"But you still need to control the energy though Seth" Aaron told him.

"I'm already doing that Aaron! Meditation remember? Qi Gong, controlling Ki energy? How do you think I'm even getting this far?" he asked. Aaron looked astonished.

"I really need to catch up on my meditation then" Aaron chuckled.

"Yeah. We should try this out. Seriously, now we know I come back each time as long as there isn't any interference from AIs, and Tachi and the others sure as hell don't want that to happen anyways. This could work" he told them.

"We could always try" Dr. Montez said.

"What do we have to lose? Seth's mind? He'll just come back together like some gelatinous blob" Aaron chuckled.

"Ha ha, so funny, whatever. Let's get this rolling" Seth grumbled and looked at Montez.

"This is crazyâ€¦ but we're all crazy doing this anyways right?" Montez asked. They both nodded.

"Energy popping, let's rock n roll" Seth smiled.

\*\*[Four hours later]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Working for a Nuclear Free City â€" Silent Melody]\*\*

"\_Starting" Seth told them.\_

"Good luck" Dr. Montez said.

Seth ran through all of his memories of what happened in the past. He remembered his dreams, the pain that was caused, the damage inflicted to him from everything. He remembered the impalement the AI had done to him, the needles used on him, the rage. The worry for Elena. Everything. Photographic memory helped indeed.

His mind fragmented and he saw like an insect temporarily.

"Split complete, you'reâ€¦ whoaâ€¦" Dr. Montez's eyes went saucer wide. There was clearly an energy ball surrounding the pod Seth was

in. He blinked as he watched in awe.

"Seth?" Tachi asked.

"\_\*\*I'm here\*\*\_" Seth echoed through the area. His voice sounded like it was coming from everywhere, not just one position.\_

The view screen showed the cameras at the coordinates shaking as what looked like a small vortex appeared at that point, lightning and energy cascading at the position.

"\_Uhâ€|" Aaron mumbled.\_

"\_\*\*I've got this\*\*\_" Seth echoed.\_

The vortex converged and slid down lines and curves of what he was trying to create. He channeled the energy and saw only a fraction of the ball's energy around his pod drop. He had plenty more. The neuron repair system was complete, and he had untold amounts left.

"Seth? You need to stop using that energy, test complete, we can do this" Dr. Montez explained as he watched the pod in worry.

"\_\*\*Copy\*\*\_" Seth echoed again.\_

Seth channeled all of the energy and dissipated the repair system as it disappeared. The energy came away from the pod and channeled outwards, far away from Earth just in case.

"\_Seth?" Aaron asked.\_

"I can see thatâ€| uhâ€| Sethâ€| are you going to do what I think you're going to do?" Dr. Montez asked.

"\_\*\*And what might that be?\*\*\_" Seth asked chuckling.\_

"Uh, blowing it up" Dr. Montez groaned out.

"\_\*\*Let there be light\*\*\_" Seth whispered. The ball condensed almost like a black hole.\_

The ball exploded in a super nova outside the galaxy, the farthest Seth could figure to be safe. If he had eyes in his mind, they were wide open in awe at what he just did. The super nova flew across the expanses of the empty void, expanding beyond anything a manmade weapon could hope to accomplish. If he was actually there, he could imagine the comical look on his face with his hair blasted around. He knew the nova would have realistically vaporized him, but he could laugh at least as the blast wave would push his cheeks back and his hair would fly around and his eyeballs would be pushed into his skull in the comedic thought he had. He'd even get one hell of a sun burn.

"HOLY SHIT!" Dr. Montez screamed as he could see from Seth's view.

"\_FUCKING HELL! WHOA!" Aaron gasped.\_

"YEAH!" Marvin cheered as he watched the entire situation. It was

incredible. A man made super nova. Dr. Montez's readings systems immediately froze and errored from the amount of energy they detected, both around Seth's pod and from the nova.

"\_\*\*WOOHOO!\*\*\_" Seth exclaimed as he had a front row seat to the awesome power. If he could, he'd be spinning around like some obsessed fan at a football game with his hands in the air with his face painted. This was awesome that he did this.\_

"Test success! YES!" Dr. Montez cheered and danced arm in arm with Marvin.

"Wait till we tell Metfield about this!" Dr. Montez exclaimed. Marvin was almost giddy.

"\_\*\*It's not like it's useful for a fire fight, I'd take out friendlies at the same time as the enemy. Last resort I'd guess. Plus, you know how strong a super nova is right? Wouldn't just take out an enemy fleet, it'd take out a sector of the galaxy with it\*\*\_" Seth told him.\_

"Doesn't matter! Look at what you did! You had energy to spare! The nutrient tanks didn't even bobble or drop an ounce!" Dr. Montez exclaimed.

"We need to tell Metfield this, he's going to flip" Marvin grinned from ear to ear.

Seth slowly got out of the pod as it shut down, and Aaron simply got out and dried himself off. Seth, on the other hand, dropped to the ground and vomited.

"Seth!" Dr. Montez yelled as Jenny ran up to him.

"Whoa, dizzyâ€| seriouslyâ€| dizzyâ€|" Seth whispered as he tried to stop the world from spinning.

"I don't understand, your vitals are good!" Jenny told him.

"Must have been the energy quantum field surrounding the pod. Wowâ€| ohâ€| ok, I know this is brand new and really awesome, but this is gonna have to be done only when I absolutely need to ok? We just found out what the after effects are. It won't kill me, but damnâ€| wowâ€|" Seth groaned as he flopped on his side and just lay there as Jenny and the other nurses cleaned him off. His eyes looked like they were shifting back and forth across the room, trying to track a moving object that wasn't there.

"At least it works though" Dr. Montez chuckled.

"Yeah, at least it works" Seth grunted as Jenny and the others picked him up and put him on a medical bed. After ten minutes, the dizziness faded and he slowly slid off the bed.

"I think I'm good nowâ€|" he said. Jenny waved her glove over his body and smiled.

"No problems it seems" she chuckled and suddenly got a beep near his pacemaker.

"What's wrong?" Seth asked. She checked it on her glove.

"Holyâ€¦ Seth, that completely drained the battery in both your pacemaker and your defibrillator" Jenny looked at him in worry.

"Wow. Uh, ok, I guess that's another side effectâ€¦ that's not goodâ€¦" he said.

"No kidding! We should prep you for a quick replacement. It should only take an hour" Jenny told him. He nodded as Dr. Montez watched them put him back on the medical bed and wheeled him towards the surgery room in the base.

"Hey, we're gonna have to do this again after you know" Seth told them.

"Yeah, we figured that. No worries, there's plenty of spares around" Montez chuckled. Seth now knew he could help Elena one more time. Her certainty was nearly there.

\*\*[1000 hours, May 11\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena sat next to her mother and her brother on the couch. Her chair was nearby, but Amber wanted to straddle her shoulders on top of the couch and weave her hair into different pony tails and such. They were watching TV while Marcus read a book on Phasic Quantum String theory. Jack was asleep in a lazy boy. Elena was still depressed, but she at least tried to make an effort to interact with everyone else as they helped her.

"There, how does that look?" Amber asked. She pushed a small hand held mirror in front of her and Elena leaned her head back and forth to look at the little feathers and beads Amber had weaved into her hair.

"Too colorful" Elena said quietly.

"Sheesh, you used to love this. You're hard to please. Fine, we'll stick with the feather strand" Amber sighed and unweaved the beads from her hair. They were watching some reality show happening involving dancing. Elena didn't want to watch, but she also didn't want to disturb anyone else from enjoying it. It was painful to see the people sliding around on the dance floor and having fun. Her legs were just limp sausages now. She worried she'd end up fat and ugly eventually as her muscles lost their firmness. She used to pride herself on her toned body, but nowâ€¦

As Amber took out the last bead and gave Elena a comforting squeeze on her shoulders, Elizabeth started to get drowsy, and so did Marcus and Milo. Elena looked at them as they slowly fell asleep, and she noticed she was getting incredibly tired as well.

"Whaâ€¦" she mumbled as she fell into dream land, and Amber fell off the back of the couch and landed on the ground slumped upside down with her ass hanging over her head. Everyone was now asleep, and it was from a gas being pumped into the house from different positions.

Suddenly, the back door opened and four men wearing all black armor and Black Ops helmets with face masks came running in and grabbed Elena and hoisted her away and out through the door. She felt nothing as they pulled her gently into a waiting pelican as the RORO closed and the thing lifted off and away, as it turned its active camo on.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Elena woke up to find she was lying on her bed. Her TNK chair was sitting nearby. How did she get up into her room? Her parents must have brought her up she thought. Her head felt groggy, like her whole body wasn't quite right. She moved to sit up, and instinctively a signal was sent to move her legs under her.

"Little strange we all fell asleep, we must have all been exhausted" Elizabeth said quietly to Milo as they drank some orange juice in the kitchen.

"Yeah, I thought it was funny that Amber was lying on the ground. You'd expect her to have gotten off the couch before she blundered there" Milo chuckled and screwed the cap back on after pouring himself a glass.

"It's a little strange that Elena was up in her room though. We didn't help her move to her bed" Elizabeth said.

"Don't look at me, I didn't do it" Milo said.

"Hmmm" his mother hummed and looked confused.

"OH MY GOD! MOM!" Elena yelled from in her room. Elizabeth and Milo ran upstairs with Jack hot on their heels. They burst into Elena's room and saw her sitting on the edge of her bed with her legs hanging over the side.

"What's wrong honey? We thought you fell" Jack asked. Elena looked up at all of them with shock. She slowly stood up. Elizabeth gasped.

"No wayâ€|" Milo whispered.

"It's a miracle!" Jack said with a smile slowly creeping on his face. Elena moved forward and stumbled, and Milo caught her as she regained her balance.

"It's incredible!" Elizabeth said and hugged her daughter. Elena was openly crying now.

"I don't know how it happenedâ€| I can walkâ€|" Elena sobbed in joy.

"Well, maybe something was just out of alignment and healed or something" Jack asked.

"The body doesn't do that Jack! The doctors themselves said it was irreparable!" Elizabeth scowled at him.

"I'm just saying Liz! She's walking! This is fantastic! She could have moved oddly in her sleep when she came up to rest or something!"

Jack told her.

"Dad, I didn't come upstairs, I thought you guys brought me up from the couch?" Elena asked.

"What? No, we didn'tâ€¦ Jack?" Elizabeth asked and they looked at him.

"Not me, maybe Marcus? Amber was still out like a light" Jack said confused.

"Let's call him up" Elena said. They called Marcus and he told them he didn't move her.

"Thenâ€¦ how the hellâ€¦" Elena said as she pushed her hand up the back of her shirt and scratched an itch.

"Oh myâ€¦ Elena, lift your shirt a bitâ€¦" Elizabeth asked. Elena lifted the back of her shirt. Elizabeth gasped.

"Oh myâ€¦ Elena, there are puncture marks at different areas! They're really small, but those spots look like bug bites almost!" Elizabeth said. Elena looked at her with wide eyes.

"Now we need to know what happened. This wasn't normal, somethingâ€¦" Jack trailed off.

"Whoâ€¦ no wayâ€¦ it couldn't beâ€¦" Elena trailed off.

"What? What are you talking about sweetie?" Elizabeth asked confused.

"Sethâ€¦" Elena whispered. Her head immediately went to him. His agency was the only one that could figure out things like this, the only one who had advanced technology it wasn't sharing to keep itself secret. Seth had just fixed her. Elena cried even more. He was looking out for her even now after she had treated him so poorly.

"Seth? What's going on?" her mother asked. She looked to Jack and he was just as confused.

"No, it's nothingâ€¦ this is greatâ€¦ I can move againâ€¦" she laughed somewhat and walked a few more steps. Her body was remembering how her legs worked after not using them for the past six days. She took another step, and another, and walked on the balls of her feet. She stumbled slightly, but regained her balance. She pirouetted across the hallway near the stair banister and twirled. She laughed as she could now walk. She then jumped for joy and hugged her family.

"This is incredible!" she exclaimed.

"A gift from someone, definitely" Jack told her. She buried her face in his shoulder as her smile slowly faded. Seth's face flashed before her eyes.

A few hours later, she was standing with Amber and her other friends as they were jumping for joy for her capability to move her legs again.

"Wow, if Seth could just see you now" Amber giggled to her. Elena's smile died off as she looked away from Amber.

"What's wrong?" Amber asked.

"Umâ€¦ I forgot to tell you guysâ€¦" Elena said softly.

"About what sweet heart? Don't tell meâ€¦ oh godâ€¦ is Sethâ€¦ dead?" Amber asked. All of her friends were worried about her now.

"Noâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I broke up with himâ€¦" Elena told them and tears bubbled up in her eyes. Amber opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. She looked between the others and they couldn't figure out what to say either.

"Whaâ€¦ howâ€¦ did he do something wrong?" Amber asked. Elena explained her feelings, and that she still loved him, but she was worried he'd get hurt because of everything that happened to her and how he had to constantly help her. She didn't dare tell them anything that told about his agency or his job, or even how her legs now worked more than likely because of him. Silence filled the room.

"Youâ€¦" Amber said softly "IDIOT!" she suddenly snapped at Elena. Elena looked at her quizzically.

"How the fuck could you possibly give up on him like that! After everything you said and you just walk away? Wow, you are something else! I cannot believe you!" Amber growled.

"What? Amber, I did it to protect him!" Elena tried to explain to her friend.

"No you did it to protect yourself! You couldn't live with yourself if something happened to him? Well guess what girl! I have news for you! Shit happens regardless of if it's you he's with or someone else! You think life is just gonna go easy on him and you just because you tell him not to be with you? He could get hit by a car the next day or be on some ship and it explodes or some terrorist like one of those insurrectionists bombs a city and he could be in it! The ways are endless he could be hurt, just like Andy when he played football! It's life damn it! You were just being a pussy!" Amber yelled her.

Elena was shocked. How could Amber say this to her?

"Howâ€¦ how could youâ€¦" Elena tried to speak.

"You need this damn it! You need to get your head out of your ass ever since Andy got married! What, do we have to tell him to come home from his honeymoon to explain shit to you? He doesn't even know if you're alive right now yet! I thought you said you moved forward? What the fuck is this shit? So you lost control of your legs before, I get the depression during that time, and I felt for you like a best friend always does. I am supportive, truly I am, but what you just did with Seth was just utterly moronic. How could I? How could you? He loves you Elena, and you just said it yourself, you love him. Why, ask yourself why you did it. Fear? Fear for him? Or you?" Amber yelled at her.



Elena's mouth hung open. She was about to be incredibly angry at Amber, scream at her and tell her she didn't understand her feelings, and just when she got the will to do it and her face contorted in anger, she stopped. Amber stood there with her arms crossed over her chest looking at her with narrowed eyes as the others stood and watched. Elena's face just softened immediately and the tears fell from her eyes. Her balled up fists loosened up, the strength leaving them.

"You're rightâ€¦ god you're rightâ€¦" she whispered and realized she had made one hell of a mistake.

"You're damned right I'm right, now go call Seth and tell him you're sorry!" Amber grumbled.

"I can't! He'sâ€¦" Elena trailed off.

"He's what? Working? Leave a message for crying out loud! Tell him to meet you! He can't always be busy right?" she asked.

"No, you don't understand! His job requiresâ€¦ it's difficult to talk to himâ€¦ I don't even have the phone numbersâ€¦ but I'll tryâ€¦ I swear I'll tryâ€¦" Elena cried and Amber sighed and hugged her friend. Marcus patted Elena on the back and Maria held her hand. They were doing their best to be supportive.

After twenty minutes, Elena went upstairs as the others talked with her parents, and she immediately called Dare on the ship.

"Veronica, it's me" Elena said quietly.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Dare asked her.

"You'll never believe it. I can walk now. But I need you to keep this under wraps ok? I know it was Seth" Elena told her.

"What? You can walk now? Wow, what a quick recovery! It was Seth though? How? Do they have that kind of technology?" Dare asked.

"I don't know, but it has to be him. Look, you know we left broken from each other, andâ€¦ Iâ€¦ it was wrong of me to do what I did to him" Elena told her.

"Don't tell me that, tell him that. He loves you Elena" Dare told her softly.

"I know! Could you get in touch with your friends again and transfer my calls to him? I have to talk with him! I have to apologize!" Elena told her worriedly.

"Hey, I'm about to get on a pelican to head down to see Buck, I don'tâ€¦ hang onâ€¦" Dare sighed and checked some things on her side.

"Here, call General Arling, he's the liaison to whoever they are. I can't guarantee he can do it, but he'll try ok?" Dare told her.

"Thanks" Elena said and hung up. She immediately called Arling right

after.

"This is General Arling" he replied on the other side.

"General Arling? This is General Gripen" Elena said.

"Oh hey Elena, I am so sorry about your condition" he said.

"No, don't worry, it's fixed, and I know it sounds crazy, but I can walk now. I need you to call up them for me, you know who I'm talking about. I need to speak with Seth. Please?" she told him.

"What? You can't? well, I guess if anyone could figure that stuff out it'd be them. They really are secretive about what they do. I'll try ok?" Arling told her.

"Thanks" she replied.

"Here's the number, do not tell anyone it understand? I might disappear if you do, though considering that diplomatic immunity you have still, I don't doubt you'd be safe for the time being. Take care ok?" he said.

"Yeah, you too. I'll be walking around next time you see me" she chuckled.

"I'm glad to hear that. Good news is few and far between these days" he said and hung up.

She called the number and waited.

"Gillies flowers! How may I help you?" a cheerful girl asked over the phone.

"I need to talk to Seth" Elena told her.

"I'm sorry ma'am, there's no one by that name working here. You might have the wrong number" she replied.

"This is General Elena Gripen, and I know you work for Richard Metfield. I know this has to be a front. Please, I'm begging you, just transfer me to him" she told her.

"Ma'am, I don't know what your-" she said but Elena heard her pause as if she was given information.

"I'll transfer you right away" she suddenly said and she heard herself put on hold. She checked the transfer number and wrote it down in her personal data pad. The info immediately scrambled after. She hoped the number was real, because it could have been a random number.

"At the tone, please leave a message" she heard. He wasn't available.

"Seth, this is. This is Elena. I. I. I am so. I am so so sorry. I needed it to be knocked into me. I can't believe how horrible I was to you. please, call me back, I'm begging you. I can't. I can't do this." she said as she felt herself choke up and she wanted to cry again.

"Please call me back, you know my number" she said and hung up.

She took a deep breath and it came out wavering. Amber walked up the stairs and looked at her with a small smile.

"I hope to god he calls back" Elena told her.

"Oh come on, he's got to" Amber chuckled. Somehow, Elena wanted to agree with her, but considering the note they left on, she didn't know. He might ignore the message entirely, and be gone for good.

\*\*[1700 hours, May 16\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

\*\*[Music: A Fine Frenzy â€" Almost Lover]\*\*

Elena decided to take a walk after an early dinner. She had spent the past five days trying to get a hold of Seth. She left countless messages. He never responded back. She tried getting in touch with Arling again, and he told her it was the number he was given. Due to how Seth had changed locations from where he was to the Conundrum when he was assisting them, and now wasn't there, it was entirely possible the calls weren't getting to him and the number meant nothing now.

Every message progressively got longer and longer, as Elena told him how she missed him, and hoped he'd come back, and that she had made a terrible mistake. Some of the messages she broke down crying. He still didn't respond. She had at one point woken up from a dream and thought she saw him sitting on the edge of her bed smiling, but as soon as she reached for him he disappeared, her mind still half asleep. She cried quietly after that. He wasn't there.

Amber was taking care of her restaurant and Marcus had work to do, and her parents still had their own jobs now that Elena could walk again. Milo was still bumming around the house to watch out for her, and did quite a bit of housework, and seemed to have a knack for electrical wiring and carpentry as he helped repair small things in the house.

Elena walked down the sidewalk with a t-shirt and a light windbreaker on and jeans, as well as sneakers. She enjoyed walking again, and even more so enjoyed being able to dance and now able to fly again. She was still missing something in her life though, and it looked bleaker and bleaker that it wouldn't come back.

She walked a few blocks as she tried to think over how everything had happened. Andy was married and supposedly just coming back from his honeymoon, though it would still take a week for him to come back with his wife. Seth was gone, where she had no idea and probably had moved on, while she was stuck in place. She still had her job as a General, and she had called the military offices to get in touch with Admiral Hood to stop the honorable discharge she was going to ask for now that she could walk again. He still found it hard to believe, and flew there to see it for himself before heading to Sacramento for a meeting with other military officials.

As she walked towards her old high school, she went through a park

and sat down at a bench for a minute. She saw the kids playing in the playground and teenagers playing basketball. There was a small baseball game happening out on the field.

She saw two kids, a boy and a girl walking away from a small ice cream vendor, and the girl's ice cream had dropped on the ground. She started to cry, but the boy looked at his own two scoop and took the top one and plopped it onto her cone. She giggled and hugged him. He smiled and she kissed him on the cheek. He wiped it away from his cheek and looked disgusted, as they were both only six or seven. Their parents called to them and they split, clearly not brother and sister. The boy kept looking behind him at the girl as she looked at him, as their parents were taking them home for the day. Elena smiled a bit at seeing them.

She got up and walked further down the path and towards a thick bushed area with lots of trees. The path wound through it with severe overgrowth, and she continued through it towards the sidewalk. The sun was slowly going down, and there was an orange color around the place. As she walked through the area, a man jumped out of nowhere and pulled her into the bushes and tried to pin her down and undress her. She struggled and kicked him and got up. He winced and got up as well and pulled a knife.

"Do what I tell you and you won't get hurt bitch" he growled under the mask. Elena got into her stance.

"Not a chance asshole" she growled back. He came at her with the knife and she grabbed his wrist and pressed on a pressure point, and brought her other hand up in a break maneuver against his elbow. She heard a snap and kicked at the side of his knee. He screamed and dropped the knife and tried to break away, but Elena rolled with his momentum and slammed him towards a tree. Her close quarters training really shined now, and she was grateful for her training in the Academy. The man ran away as fast as he could as she kept her stance until he was long gone. She sighed and looked down at the knife. It looked like some standard switchblade you could buy at any hunting or sports store.

She picked it up and brought it with her. It looked pretty much brand new, so she wondered if the guy was some new pervert in the area. She never had to worry about it in the past, but then again she never walked through the park really. She knew she broke the guy's arm at the elbow, and probably had damaged his knee with her kick. She smirked. He wouldn't be preying on anyone for a long time, if ever again.

She walked back towards her home and unlocked the door. Her parents were still not home and Milo was just about to head out.

"Hey, couple of the guys are in town and wanted to hook up, so I'm heading out" he told her.

"Ok" she responded quietly.

"You gonna be ok while I'm gone? You could come with us if you want. I know you don't know most of them, but their grunts like me. A few armies together could get you to cheer up, have others to talk to" he told her.

"No, that's ok, don't want to intrude. Go on, I'll be fine" she told him. He nodded and gave her a hug.

"Things will move forward ok? You got your legs under you again, that's something. You just gotta take the right steps forward" he told her. She nodded and walked to the kitchen as Milo walked out and was about to close the door.

"Hey, mom and dad said they went out for the night and apologize for not inviting you. Mom's doing some dinner meeting with her company and dad came along as an escort for her" Milo suddenly spoke up through the half closed door.

"Ok, have a nice time" she told him quietly. He looked at her in the kitchen worriedly and then closed the door.

She was alone in the house and figured she'd just order a pizza. She was still depressed. How could a man who she dumped make her so down? Did he really mean so much to her? He clearly did as they had even talked about marriage, but she had told him they needed to both wait until the right time considering their jobs.

The pizza came forty minutes later and she paid the pizza boy. She ignored the fact the pizza boy eyed her up and down with her physique and tipped. He was a pimply faced teenager with braces and was probably doing the job part time while in high school. She closed the door and brought the pizza with her to the living room and sat down on the couch. She turned on the TV and ate a slice. She then got back up as some romance movie came up and went to grab a drink.

She seemed annoyed with the movie and turned the channel to other things, but most of them showed either some cartoon mouse kissing a female cartoon mouse, another romance in Spanish, some sci fi flick with some alien coming towards the woman and screaming while the man stood in front of her protecting her with his body, news, history involving the art of seduction, science channel involving quantum mechanics, and sports. She finally settled on a movie that had just come out and she downloaded it on the TV and watched it. She didn't really seem interested in it, but it passed the time. She curled up on the couch and finished a good portion of her pizza before slowly falling asleep.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Elena woke up startled as her cell rang. She picked it up.

"Hey Elena, it's mom" Elizabeth said.

"Oh hey, what's going on?" she asked and looked at the time. It was eleven o'clock.

"The meeting is slowly winding down, you ate right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I got a pizza. Don't worry about me, I'm fine" she told her.

"Just checking. Hey, apparently one of the people here has a son maybe a few years younger than you, pretty good looking from the pictures. Maybe you should start thinking about someone else"

Elizabeth told her.

"Mom, I'm not interested in being hooked up with some kid who doesn't understand me" Elena grumbled.

"Oh come on now honey, he's not that bad. He works in modeling apparently" she told her.

"Are you kidding me mom? Those guys are always so self-centered. No thanks. I have my standards? I'm a General for crying out loud" Elena growled.

"Alright, alright, don't worry, I just told them I'd tell you. Hey, you know you need to eventually move forward right? Move past your break up with him" Elizabeth told her.

"I know! I know! I just! It's barely been a few weeks, I'd like to slowly ease in ok? Sheesh, everybody keeps using that same line of moving forward!" she told her annoyed.

"Ok, slowly. Hey, I gotta get back to the meeting, talk to you when we get home alright?" her mother said.

"Yeah, love" she said and hung up. Elena took a deep breath and blinked. The lights were off for the most part and she realized it was probably time for bed anyways. She cleaned up after herself and turned the TV off, and then went upstairs as she turned lights on and headed to her room. As she closed her door and turned on her light, she looked left and noticed her small pelican model still sitting on the dresser, its wing still held together.

She picked it up and looked over the wing. The model was given by her father, but all she could think about was how Seth had fixed it, like he fixed everything, or tried to. Elena took a deep breath and put the model down and got ready for bed, and then checked her emails. Most of them were reports from her subordinates back on the Conundrum as well as on Earth explaining the transfers for the destroyed wing. She sighed as she realized her job wasn't going to just stop while she had a breakdown in life. She read through a few of them and realized it was midnight, and put the terminal into screensaver mode, with little flying jets shooting around.

She went to her window sill and sat down. Her Long Sword model was still sitting there, still ready to launch if given the word. She picked it up and looked at it. The thing was two feet long, and was huge for when she got it. Now, it seemed about average, and she played with it for a bit. She made a few swooshing sounds and zooms, and then put it down and sighed and looked out through her window.

"Seth, wherever you are! please come back!" she whispered. Nothing happened. No knight in shining armor coming to her rescue, no sneaking up behind her and hugging her. He wasn't there. He was gone.

\*\*[1300 hours, May 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena had just done her stretches for the morning and decided to head to her hangar. She called the Esprit and had it come down to pick her

up, and then she headed over and landed. She did a bit of sweeping around and did some maintenance on her pelican. As she worked on it slowly, her mind wandering, she heard a bit of movement near the door. She leaned over the roof as she had been working on calibrating the sensors on top and saw someone she did not expect to see. Andy.

His face was in awe as he saw her, and her mouth hung open.

"Elena" he almost whispered.

"Hey you" she smiled and crawled off the top of the pelican and ran to hug him. He hugged her close.

"God I thought you were dead!" he almost yelled as he held her.

"I got rescued" she whispered as she buried her face in his chest. Her old flame was there. He pulled back and looked at her.

"I heard about everything, well, everything they could tell me at least from your parents. Incredible. God, I missed you so much" he said softly and there was a hurt look in his eyes as he cupped her face. She smiled.

"Yeah, a lot has happened huh?" she chuckled.

"Yeahâ€¦" he trailed off and looked away from her.

"I'm not mad Andy" she told him. He looked back into her eyes.

"Elena, Iâ€¦ we all thought you were dead. Youâ€¦ you made me promise to move forwardâ€¦ andâ€¦" he tried to explain, to let her know the reasons.

"It's ok, I know. I hopeâ€¦ I hope you guys are happy together, really" she gave him a fake smile, but it hurt to see him, especially married. His wedding ring was sitting prominently on his finger.

"I'm so sorry Elena. Had I known, I'd haveâ€¦ Iâ€¦" he looked like he was about to cry, but he pulled her to him and hugged her again.

"It's ok Andy, don't worry, everything is ok" she cooed to him as he held her. He pulled back again and looked into her eyes, and she faked a smile.

"Where's your wife? Didn't bring her to meet me?" she chuckled.

"She's actuallyâ€¦ well, she's talking to the guard at the entrance" he told her.

"Really? Well then, I know I look like a mess right now" she said as she motioned to her grease covered work shirt and shorts. She had on knee pads and elbow pads and a small harness around her shorts to keep her from falling off from above the pelican.

"You always look beautiful, you know that" he told her as she could

tell his heart was being torn seeing her again, but he was with another woman.

"Let's go talk to her then" Elena smiled and walked out of the hangar and towards the front gate. Andy followed as Elena reached it. Jessica was standing there talking to the guard as she looked over and gasped. Elena smiled to her. Jessica had long platinum blonde hair and emerald green eyes.

"Hi, you must be Jessica, so nice to meet you" Elena said and put her hand out to shake.

"Hi! You must be Elena. Andy told me so much about you. Wow, it is really gonna be hard to live up to you" she chuckled and shook her hand. Jessica looked Elena up and down.

"Hey Andy, you sure know how to pick them. She's gorgeous" Elena chuckled.

"Oh thank you! You're very beautiful too. It's so great you were able to come back. Andy told me about everything about what happened. That must have been awful" Jessica told her.

"Yeah, but I'm here, in the now you know?" Elena chuckled.

"That's great! I guess the rescue teams did their job" Jessica giggled. Elena's thoughts shot immediately to Seth.

"Well, one of them did, yeah" she replied and smiled. It hurt that Andy stood next to Jessica and hugged her and kissed her on the forehead. They were together now and Elena had no one at the moment.

"We just stopped by to see if you really were here and they weren't playing a mean joke on me. It's really good to see you Elena" Andy told her.

"Yeah, it's good to be seen again, same to you Andy" she said softly. Elena's and Andy's eyes were staring at each other, remembering all the good times they had. But those times were gone now.

"Hey, sorry we gotta scoot, dinner with her parents. We'll see you later then?" Andy asked.

"Yeah, no problem. You know my hang outs" she chuckled. Andy gave her a hug, and then Jessica actually gave her a hug as well. They got into a new model Hog and waved goodbye. Elena waved goodbye and they both drove off. Elena felt her heart sink. She walked back to the hangar and closed the door. She was alone.

Elena looked at the Esprit and sighed. She finished the maintenance and cleaned herself up, and then got inside and started her up. The Esprit hummed to life as she rolled it out and called TowerCOM. They authorized her departure, and she headed towards her house.

She landed the pelican and got out, and then sent the Esprit back. She unlocked the door and walked in. Her parents were again not there, and Milo was staying at a friend's to help him move to a new home. She was alone again. She figured she could go to Amber's restaurant and hang out with her, or see how Marcus was doing at his



company, but neither truly appealed to her. She wanted one person to show up, and he wasn't there.

She walked into the kitchen and started making pasta. The cooking was slowly working her mind to keep her hands from getting cut up as she chopped vegetables and boiled the water. As she finished the last one, she stopped and thought for a moment. Tears slowly built up in her eyes and she cried as she realized she was cooking for one. Would she always be this way?

"You know, the amount of transfers I seemed to have in my voice mail was insane" a voice said from behind her. She immediately flipped around to see who the intruder was. Standing on the opposite side of the kitchen, was Seth. Elena dropped the knife on the ground and gasped. The tears stopped as she just stared at him. He smiled. He was wearing his motorcycle yellow and black jacket and his fire hose material black pants and sneakers. His sunglasses were hung on his black t-shirt.

She tried to say something, but her voice wouldn't work. She took a few tentative steps towards him as she brought her hands up towards him, wondering if he was real. He smirked.

"You know with all the messages, I was worried something happened. I see you're walking again. The operation was a success" he chuckled. She stepped right up to him and touched his face, and then suddenly grabbed him and hugged him close. She cried as she bear hugged him.

"Whoa, easy now. I'm a little sore" he winced. She pulled back and kissed him again and again.

"Whaâ€| areâ€| youâ€| ok?" he asked between kisses.

"I am so sorry, I swear I didn't mean anything I said, I didn't! I love you" she sobbed to him.

"Easy, easy, it's fine. I knew you didn't mean it. Considering you never made me pinkie swear to leave, I kind of figured it was just hormones or something" he chuckled. She laughed as she looked at him and cupped his face and rubbed her thumb on his cheek.

"God I missed you. I called every day but you wouldn't respond" she told him softly with a smile breaking out on her face.

"Yeah, sorry about that, I was running Dark Ops after your operation, no calls while we were doing them" he told her.

"Dark Ops?" she asked.

"Yeah, no response to the outside world to give away our position. We were under cover to catch an innie hiding out. I had to meet a few other operatives in the field" he told her. She looked confused.

"I don't always do remote viewing hon. I'm still an agent" he told her grinning. He leaned his forehead against hers. She just gazed into his eyes, glad that he was there.

"You know, you're going to have to eventually put the noodles in the water" he told her with a smirk on his face.

"Yeahâ€¦ oh, yeah" she said almost in a trance, but broke out of it and looked behind her. She looked up at him again.

"I'm not going anywhere. You didn't pinkie swear, and two pinkie swears don't override each other, kind of like some laws or amendments" he told her with a grin.

"Two pinkie swears?" she asked.

"Yeah, remember? I pinkie swore I'd never disappear, and you didn't break that promise or you'd have a broken pinkie right now" he chuckled.

"I remember" she giggled. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped away the tears. She smiled as he doted over her like some mother hen.

"Noodles. I'm a patient guy" he told her.

"Promise?" she asked with a smirk.

"No, but then again you don't need me to promise. You know" he told her with a smile. She kissed him again, and it was long and deep. She broke away and backed towards the boiling water.

"You know, you could add salt to the water" he told her.

"I know, I already did" she told him as he came up behind her and peeked at what she was cooking.

"Ok, just checking" he grinned and looked at the vegetables.

"YOU can set the table" she told him. He nodded and reached into the cupboards and pulled out the plates and glasses.

"How many places?" he asked.

"Two" she told him over her shoulder and smiled. He chuckled and set the table. Once the noodles were half cooked, she drained the water and threw the noodles into a pan with the sauce and vegetables. She checked the taste and added a bit of black pepper. She then took a small spoonful and brought it up for Seth to taste. He took a small taste and licked his lips.

"Needs a tiny bit more salt" he told her.

"It's got plenty of salt!" she smirked.

"I'm just joking. It's good" he told her. She rolled her bloodshot eyes from crying and put a heaping plateful of the pasta on one plate, and another heaping plateful on another. Seth put them on the table and Elena opened a small door that led into a basement. There, she picked out a wine just for the hell of it, and brought it up.

"650 Cordigan sound good?" she asked.

"I'm up for anything hon" he told her softly. She cut the wrapping off the top and checked for a corkscrew.

"Oh noâ€|" she grumbled as she couldn't find one in the drawer.

"Here, a little trick I learned" he told her and asked for the bottle. He pulled off his shoe and put the bottom of the bottle into it. He then whacked his shoe against the side of the counter continuously a few times until the cork popped almost out. He then put his shoe on and grabbed the cork and pulled carefully.

"Doesn't work well for reds, as the sediment moves around, but white is fine" he told her smiling.

"How did you evenâ€|" she shook her head with a small smile on her face. He poured the wine in the glasses and rolled the bottle so the lip caught any drooling. Elena lit a few candles and dimmed the lights, and they sat down.

"I'm glad you're here" Elena told him softly.

"I'm glad I am too. Oh yeah, I'm glad you're here as well" he chuckled. She laughed and rolled her eyes. They both ate almost silently beyond a few sentences.

"This is really good" he told her in between mouthfuls.

"Thank you" she told him.

"Welcome" he replied.

They finished eating and Seth picked up her plate and brought it to the sink. He rinsed them off and put them into the dish washer, and then Elena led him upstairs to her room.

"Hey, again sorry I couldn't answer immediatelyâ€| things are a little hectic out there with rebel activity. They decided now of all times to start a bit of a ruckus" he told her as he held her sitting on the window sill. She leaned against him.

"Is it really that bad?" she asked.

"Did you hear the news? Luyten is in open rebellion" he told her. Elena looked at him wide eyed.

"Wow, and they think they can get away with it?" she asked.

"They sort of have Elena. CENTCOM in the area is in shambles since the Covenant War. Things aren't that cut and dry. We're working on it, but it's a slow process" he told her.

"That's a little scary" she told him.

"Eh, don't worry about it. We'll handle it. ONI has operative on the ground, we have operatives on the ground, there are TAG operatives on the ground, we're all doing something" he told her.

"TAG?" she asked.

"Ah, oops. You never heard about them from me. They're not exactly known, and they're a lot smaller than us. They give good intel

though. Enough about that though, how are you doing?" he asked her softly.

"Better now" she told him and leaned her head in the crook of his neck. They stayed that way for a while.

"Thanks" she suddenly whispered.

"For what?" he asked.

"My legs" she told him.

"Ah" he started to say.

"I know it was supposed to look like nothing, but the little bumps that looked like bee stings?" she told him.

"Yeah, hypos tend to make those" sorry, they'll go away" he told her.

"They already have" she told him and pulled up the back of her shirt. He touched her back and looked at the spots he knew she was injected, as the red marks were gone. One thing led to another and he started to give her a message. She pulled down the blinds of her window and turned around and looked at him. She slowly pulled off his jacket and undid his pants as she kissed him.

He unbuttoned her pants as well, as they slowly stripped and caressed each other. Seth picked her up from the window sill and continued to kiss her as they moved to her bed, but he stopped just for a few seconds to close her door and lock it, and then jumped back to her.

They did their best to stay quiet, though they still wanted to be passionate.

"I love you" she whispered to him as he kissed her neck.

"I love you too" he whispered back as they crept under the covers.

(Author's Note: Yes! Mushy! I know! Fluffy stuff for Elena, she went emo for a while. Good thing she didn't cut herself, that'd be bad. They're together! And she can walk again! And Seth can make really big explosions that scare even him that actually don't have much use. Seriously, if a super nova went off nearby, we'd all be dead, not just a fleet. But he can also make things from nothing like the Precursors can now! As long as he knows the blueprint, and he knows it's operational, nothing completely out of sci fi that he doesn't know about.)

## 18. Shore Leave

\*\*[0800 hours, May 21\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena woke up refreshed under the covers she was sharing with another. Seth's arm was draped over her waist under the sheets as she got a phone call on her cell.

"Gripen" she said into her cell. Seth woke up quickly from her talking and remained silent.

"Hey Elena, it's me, Andy" she heard.

"Oh hey Andy, how'd your dinner go with your wife's parents?" she asked and looked over her shoulder at Seth. He smiled. He knew he had her. He had nothing to fear.

"It went good actually. Hey, Jessica and I are going to a small beach party, weâ€¦ we wondered if you wanted to come along?" Andy asked. She looked over at Seth again as he messaged her back. She liked it when he pampered her with affection, little things that didn't really need to be sexual in nature.

"Do I bring a plus one?" she asked and giggled a bit when Seth touched a ticklish spot.

"You don't have to if you don't want to Elena. I knowâ€¦ I don't want things to be awkward between us there with you bringing some random guyâ€¦" Andy told her.

"I'm bringing Seth" she told him. Andy was silent for a moment.

"Seth? Oh yeah, him. You got in touch with him again? I thought he disappeared right after high school" he said.

"He was the one who rescued me, and tried to get me to your wedding. Heâ€¦ Andy, I'm with him now. I've moved forward just like you did" she blurted out. There, it was out in the open. She told her ex that she was with another now just as he was now married.

"Really?... Iâ€¦ I'm glad" he told her. Elena thought he'd be angry and think that she had disappeared with Seth, that it was all just a lie that she was lost in space and that she was secretly having an affair with him.

"You are? Iâ€¦ he helped me Andy, he watched out for me after I found out you twoâ€¦ wellâ€¦ when you two got married. Andy, I love him, just like you love Jessica" she told him. He was silent again. Elena gazed into Seth's eyes as she talked. He smiled and nodded. He loved her too.

"Good. At least I know you'll be taken care of by someone we know, someone who isn't some new guy you have to figure out, or I have to worry about. We both liked you all those years ago remember? I had my shot with you, and circumstances stopped that. Don't let anything get between you two" he told her softly.

"I won't, not ever again" she replied. Certainty was set. She'd make sure under all things life threw at them they'd work it out. She'd temper her jealousy and her anger and make sure she thought things through before she acted.

"So you'll bring him along? Awesome. Hey, let him know we're cool ok?" Andy said.

"Yeah, I'll let him know" she chuckled as Seth leaned in and pulled

her long black hair away from her neck and started kissing it.

"Hey, gotta go help Jess get a new bathing suit. See ya at the beach then. Later" Andy told her.

"Yeah, later" Elena replied. Andy hung up and Elena rolled over to face Seth. They just looked at each other for a few minutes while lying in bed. A knock came to the door.

"Oh shit, it's probably my parents" Elena whispered.

"So?" Seth looked at her confused.

"We're a little exposed?" Elena told him.

"Hey Elena? There's a car outside in the driveway. Elena? Hello?" they heard. It was her mother. Seth's eyebrows raised high as Elena suppressed a giggle.

"No cycle?" she asked him.

"I told you I had a car. I meant it" he chuckled.

"Elena? Are you in there?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yeah mom, just getting dressed" Elena told her and slipped out of bed stark naked. She put some panties on and a bra and long t-shirt, and Seth got his boxers on and his pants. Elena unlocked the door and peeked out.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Hey, breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. What are you hiding in there?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm still getting dressed mom, don't worry" she told her.

"Really? That so?" Elizabeth said and crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I've always been a little careful with people seeing me exposed mom!" Elena told her.

"Uhuh" Elizabeth said and Elena was going to continue when she glanced behind her and did a double take. Seth was standing there in full view of the cracked open door.

"Hello Mrs. Gripen" Seth told her.

"Hello Seth. Good to see you two are back together again. I take it you two enjoyed last night?" Elizabeth asked with a catty grin curling up on her mouth.

"Mom!" Elena gawked at her with the now fully open door.

"Oh please, it's true and you know it. Come down when you two are ready" Elizabeth said and nodded to Seth. She walked away and Elena closed the door. She giggled profusely as Seth did the same. They both took a shower, and at the same time as well as Seth washed her back. They got out and Elena dried her hair while Seth got his

clothes on. She then got dressed and they both came downstairs together.

"Hey there Seth, good to see you back" Jack grinned. Milo gave him a nod and thumbs up.

"Hey, yeah, had to do a few things before coming here. Good to be back" he said and looked at Elena. She gave him a smile and grasped his hand, and entwined her fingers with his as they sat down to eat.

"So, a lot planned today?" Elizabeth asked.

"We got invited to a beach party" Elena told her.

"Well, I hope you two have fun. You deserve it after everything that's happened" Elizabeth told them. They ate and Elena quickly grabbed her bathing suit, a black two piece with white sash and straw brim hat and stashed them in a bag. She brought sunblock lotion and a beach towel.

"Ah, you don't have a swimsuit" Elena said and looked at Seth.

"No worries, we still have to get there right?" Seth asked. She nodded.

"I sort of have a small beach house nearby" he told her sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck.

"You do? Is that where you live?" she asked.

"Nah, I use it when I feel like surfing. I don't do it that often though. Hell to stay in during storm season" he told her.

"Do you have a swimsuit there?" Elena asked.

"Yeah, we'll stop there before walking out. Quick trip to the beach since it's right on my doorstep. I don't really live there though" he told her.

"Still, kind of nice to have two homes" she smiled.

"It's a nice place to hang out at or bum around when you want a change of pace" he replied and chuckled.

"I'll bet" she giggled and Seth escorted her out of the house to his car as her family said goodbye. Elena dropped her bag on the ground in awe.

There, sitting in the driveway, was a black MR14 Growler GT, the spiritual successor to a cherished muscle car so named from a wild horse, the Mustang. Elena had always thought Hogs were nice trucks, but this was a whole other ballgame. In speed, it most likely could eat the Hog for lunch any day of the week, and had the capability to keep up with some of the fastest motorcycles as well. She was never much into cars since she had a pelican, but if she could have a car, this was what she wanted.

Seth walked up to her and waved his hand in front of her face.

"Hello? Oh, yeah, had him for a year. It suits my needs" he told her.

"And what needs are those? Outrunning the cops? This isn't gonna be like one of those old spy flicks where the car has special things installed in it like rocket launchers and machine guns and ejection seats is it?" she asked him with a smirk.

"What, this? No, you watch too many movies. I don't have that" he told her with a furrowed brow.

"Thank god" Elena sighed in relief.

"I modified the ejection seats so it's all of them, not just the front seats. Fun while playing chicken" he scoffed at her and walked away. Elena gawked and he grinned.

"Just kidding" he laughed. She pursed her lips together in mock annoyance and grabbed her bag. His laugh died down as she rolled her eyes and grinned.

"Boys and their toys" she chuckled.

"Hey, I needed a car, my old one was starting to get beat up; so I got a new one. I'm happy with it" he told her and walked to the car. She went around the passenger side and touched the door handle. It instantly opened for her.

"Oh yeah, you're coded" he said grinning and opened his own door. They both slid in and Elena put her bag in the back seat. Seth started the car and the throaty roar of the engine woke up. He backed the car up and headed towards the beach.

They drove along the winding streets and reached a row of houses that seemed to go up at least three floors. Seth parked at one of them in the one car garage and helped Elena out. She saw two surf boards hanging on the wall of the garage and a bicycle. He unlocked the garage door and they entered into the house. Elena saw they had entered the small kitchen and walked out of a small open door frame with swinging hinge doors to the living room and also acted as the dining room. There was another smaller room right of the living room which seemed to have an assortment of computers and storage. The staircase was along the left wall of the living room.

"Here, I'll show you around" he told her and walked up the stairs. There were not one, but four bedrooms and a rather large balcony that wrapped around the right side of the house near the master bedroom. There was a full bathroom at the end of the hallway, and two of the rooms were enamel wood covered with odd sea trinkets for art and color. There was another smaller staircase that headed to the third floor. The third floor comprised of an observation room with a white L couch and large screen TV, as well as a telescope and a large balcony overlooking the beach with a patio table and four chairs, as well as two longer chairs people could lay out on and just people watch. There was a pool table in the corner, and the whole third floor was just glass windows and a glass door set between four large wooden beams.

Elena was gawking.



"This is small?" she asked him.

"Well, I mean, I bring friends around here so we can go surfing together or just hang out sometimes. I never really saw it as large. You should see some of the other houses around here" he told her.

"I HAVE seen some of the other houses around here! They're mansions!" she growled amusingly.

"You haven't seen the whole place yet. There's still the small grotto in the back" he told her.

"Grotto?" she asked. He walked downstairs to the bottom floor and she followed. They walked through the back door and Elena was suddenly assaulted by green and plants surrounding the backyard. The walls were massive, going up to the third floor and completely surrounding the place as they were covered in ivy. There was a Jacuzzi in the corner, and what looked like a rolled up wrestling mat, as well as some chairs and another table with sofa chairs. There was an overhang just over the back door that trailed to the left a bit to another door.

"What's in there?" Elena asked. He opened it. The laundry room along with two spare pull down cots that folded up on the wall, and a shower stall along with a table to place boards on for maintenance. There were a few wet suits laying around, and some sex wax lying on the table. In the corner there was an assortment of pool cleaning supplies for the Jacuzzi.

"It's not much, this is where you'd go if you had to clean off chlorine or something from your hair in the shower, do laundry without making noise for anyone in the house, do repairs on the boards, stuff like that" he explained to her. She loved the house. It was beautiful to her.

"This place must have cost a fortune" she told him as they both reentered the house.

"Actually it was a steal, probably because of what it looked like before all of the remodeling" he told her.

"Remodeling? You mean it didn't look like this?" she asked.

"Are you kidding me? Hon, this used to be a one story shack, with barely enough room for a bed, toilet and small shower. I had it torn down and rebuilt, and slowly expanded it. Took a lot of effort to get it to this" he told her and walked to a bookshelf and pulled out an album. He turned a page and showed her what it looked like. It was hideous, with a tin roof. She grimaced.

"So, you don't live here? I'd love to if I had a chance" she told him as she looked around.

"Well, yeah, for the most part I just come here once in a while to surf and bum around. I mostly live in the high rise" he told her.

"High rise? You live in a high rise?" Elena gawked.

"Again, you should have seen the work I put into it. No one wanted to live on the top floor. I had to beg the landlord to let me rip up the whole roof and rebuild it. It's technically three stories high now, but there's only two stories to live on. It's in a bit of an expensive neighborhood, but security is decent there" he told her.

"Wow, why didn't you tell me you were rich" she giggled.

"I'm not really, I did the work over time. I got the high rise done for me because it would take a whole crew to handle it, and the house I sort of had friends help me build her" he replied.

"Wait, you built this house up?" she asked.

"Yeah, we also blew it up before we built on top of the rubble. Better foundation, stronger base, complete reconstruction. Still annoying to live in during storms. Just hard to get outside when the wind is blowing and rain is pouring all over the place, you get drenched pretty quick with no real overhang besides the balconies" he told her. She blinked at him with raised eyebrows. She was really impressed.

"What? People have two homes all over the place, it isn't uncommon. I just invested my money where I thought I needed to. I didn't go out and buy a yacht or something. I actually use this place to get away from stuff, not show off. Trust me, this place is very easy going, and I like that, but the high rise is very modern, high tech, more living in the middle of everything you know? Useful for everyday living" he explained.

"And the car?" she asked amused.

"I like it, and it does what I need it to. If I'm gonna drive around, I'm driving with at least some class. It's not like one of those rolling civilian tanks or royalty cars others try and buy" he told her. She chuckled at him.

"Go on, go get changed, I'll grab my swimsuit" he told her. She walked up with her bag and changed into her swim suit in the master bedroom as Seth did the same. The master bedroom was all white with a large TV and the bathroom just to the left of the entrance. The large balcony actually wrapped around the front of the house just below the upper balcony, so the house looked a bit funny outside, but was amazing inside. The upper balcony also acted as rain defense for the master bedroom, as the walk out of the balcony door was nothing but plexi-glass and blinds. The other three rooms were somewhat dark with the enameled wood on the walls, feeling like log cabins. The third bedroom had two bunk beds inside, probably for spare people in the event of a large group going to surf.

"Hell, we could hold a party here" Elena told him.

"You want to?" he asked.

"Wha? Uhâ€¦ wellâ€¦" she thought for a moment.

"It's up to you, I'm ok with opening it up if you want to. Clean up is a bit of a bitch though after however" he told her.

"Nah, I don't really feel like cleaning the place after people drink a bit too much, and frankly? I don't really wanna share it with the others" she smiled.

"Our little getaway huh?" he chuckled.

"Exactly" she replied with a grin on her lips.

"Fair enough. Ready?" he asked. She nodded. He grabbed a beach towel and lotioned himself and her up, and they both did each other's backs. He brought two sweat shirts just in case the water was cold or the weather took a turn for the worst at any time. Even though it was May, they could never be too careful. Elena remembered the saying April showers brings May flowers, but she also knew there were rain storms during May as well, and could stop the whole party halfway.

They walked out of the house and across the street to the beach, which was right on their doorstep practically. They walked a short distance down the beach and saw Andy with Jessica. Marcus and Jennifer were sitting around, and Maria was grabbing a drink from the coolers. There were other people around as well, a good twenty others that both Seth and Elena didn't know.

"Hmm, now I know it would have been a bad idea to try and hold the party at the house" Elena whispered as they both saw two fire fighter buddies pour beers on top of each other. Seth nodded. There were chairs all around and a volley ball net set up. There was also a bon fire built up for later. A few of the other friends brought surf boards, and Andy's Hog was sitting on the sand providing another area to sit in or on to relax. They had the stereo on in the Hog as everyone was just enjoying themselves. Some eyed Elena up in her bikini and sash.

"Hey Elena, glad you could make it" Andy said as he walked up to her with flip flops. Jessica joined him with sunglasses and a one piece light blue bathing suit and a light green shawl. They both hugged Elena and turned to Seth.

"Hey man, long time no see" Andy said and shook his hand like an old friend.

"Like wise" Seth responded. Andy wore dark blue swim shorts with small scratches designed into them. Seth wore black cargo swim shorts. Andy had never seen Seth without his shirt on. Even though Andy was built well as a fire fighter, Seth was nothing but muscle, lean muscle, but muscle nonetheless. There wasn't an inch of him that wasn't toned or hardened. Andy was pretty buff, but there was no doubt who'd win in a fight, despite the weight difference. Jessica shook his hand and they all went back to the party. For the most part they just hung around the chairs and talked while drinking sodas and cooking burgers and hotdogs on a grill. Elena and Seth teamed up for a game of totem water polo in teams, though they didn't win. Elena was a little bummed about that as she worried Seth didn't like it. He didn't care either way, as long as she had fun.

"It isn't the destination, but the journey you should look forward to, for it provides the most benefit and tests you. Besides, you had fun and I did too" Seth whispered to her as they went back onto the beach from the water. She nodded in agreement

Seth got conscripted into Andy's team for volley ball. It was four on four with Marcus on their side and one of Andy's friends. The other side had nothing but fire fighters. None of them realized how high Seth could actually jump and spike a ball the first time they tried to score a point. The fire fighter that Seth had aimed at nearly got the ball right between the legs, but it barely missed and hit the sand. Elena and Jessica cheered them on as the game was won 12-3. Seth made most of the points almost single handedly, though in defense Marcus was surprisingly good at finding exactly where the ball would land and bump it in the air for Seth to bring it down on the other side. Andy was unstoppable in serving.

"Looking good babe!" Elena yelled out. Seth gave her a thumbs up. They won, and the fire fighters built another team and brought in another group of players from nearby. There was apparently another smaller group hanging out nearby doing their own thing, and figured they'd compete. Seth sat down with Elena and ate a burger as they both watched. The fire fighters won, but apparently three of the opposite team were ex-marines. They weren't exactly happy with the ending.

"Hey guys, it's all fair here, it was a good game" the fire fighters tried to explain, trying to be good sports about the whole thing. The opposite team was annoyed. Apparently they took the game seriously.

"Fuck that shit! What the hell man?" the ex-marines growled.

"Hey, calm down, it's just a game" Elena told them.

"No fuck you cunt! They cheated!" one of them growled. Seth stood up.

"Hey, there's no need to call her names, knock it off" Seth growled out.

"What are you gonna do about it? Huh?" he asked, getting in Seth's face. Andy was right beside him as were the other fire fighters.

"We got your back man" Andy whispered.

"Hey stop this!" Jessica yelled out.

"Yeah, seriously, this is getting out of hand, this was all just fun, who cares who loses or wins?" Marcus spoke up.

"We do if it's played fair!" one of them growled.

"Guys, this is just getting out of hand, just leave please, there's no need to start something" Elena told them.

"Shut the fuck up bitch!" one of them yelled at her as he pointed at her.

"You call her a name one more time and I will make you regret it" Seth said coldly. Elena suddenly realized his voice went from angry to extremely cold. Something had just changed in him temporarily. He went agent almost immediately.

"Yeah? What the fuck you gonna do about it slim?" one of the guys said and poked at his chest. Seth grabbed his finger and snapped it, and as he tried to fight back with his own close quarters training, Seth excelled beyond. The ex-marine struck at Seth's neck to try and disable him, but he glanced the hit off his arm brought up for defense, grabbed the marine's arm and elbowed him in the face, knocking him lower to the ground before kneeing him in the stomach.

The second ex-marine threw a punch quick as he jumped through the air, but Seth grabbed his hand and rolled him sideways as the third one came up to strike at him from a different angle, and used his friend as a shield and threw him. They rolled and got to their feet as Andy tried to join in, but Seth waved them off. He was gonna do this alone.

\*\*[Music: The Offspring "You're Gonna Go Far, Kid"]\*\*

One marine threw a punch at Seth and he actually took it to his gut, and ignored it. He brought his elbow right down on the guy's arm and struck with his knee, and then brought his fist up in a sledgehammer move against his face, but the ex-marine blocked. Good. It provided leverage for Seth to elbow him right in the face and lean into it. The ex-marine went down as his friend came up and tried to kick out Seth's legs. He picked up one foot and rolled with the kick, and was brought up like a yoyo as he double kicked with the extra lift the ex-marine gave him and knocked him on his ass. The third marine got his breathing back and charged at him. Everyone there had seen charges in movies. The guy either was knocked off his feet or just ignored it and started beating on the charger's back. Seth did neither.

He rolled out of the way and grabbed the guy's foot and lifted it, sending him head first into the sand. Seth shook his head annoyed. The first one got back up and tried to kick Seth's head. He grabbed it and pulled and then kicked at his knee, displacing it and sending him to the ground in pain. Marines were well trained, but Seth had to learn to fight multiple targets at the same time against all odds. Agents almost always worked alone. Marines didn't.

The second marine got up and threw a haymaker, but Seth grabbed his arm and pulled and threw his own punch, and used the momentum to simply cold clock the guy. He dropped to the ground unconscious from the strike and Seth again shook his head in annoyance.

"Amateurs" he grunted. The last one got up from the sand and came at him. He tried to foot sweep Seth, but he jumped into the air and kicked out with his legs at the last second as the marine came back up from his spin and right into both feet. Seth landed back first in the soft sand, but the marine went flying backwards. Seth kip-uped from the ground almost immediately while the marine rolled and held his chest.

"Alright, fine! We'll back off! Shit!" he growled. Seth just stood there amused with his ruse.

"Really?" he asked raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah" he said and walked forward. Seth didn't let his guard down one inch. Just three feet from him he threw another punch and Seth

grabbed the fist and pressed on a pressure point and thrust his own punch into his gut. He held his stomach as the wind was knocked out of him as Seth pushed him back on the sand.

"Rangers are coming, best run" Seth told him. He got up and ran to his car and drove off as the Rangers rolled up and picked up the other two who were on the ground unconscious. They took reports from each person in Elena's and Seth's group and then left them alone after, and took the guys off to be held.

"Wow, didn't expect that from you man, nice work" Andy said and clapped Seth on the shoulder. Seth was still in agent mode, though he was getting out of it and loosening up. He cast a glare at Andy coldly, but softened it quickly. Everyone was cheering and clapping at his defense of the party.

"Sorry, head is still in the fight" he told him. Andy nodded. Elena hugged Seth as he came back over to her and the party slowly got back in gear. The fire fighters were somewhat intimidated by Seth now however.

"Didn't know you could fight like that man" Andy told him. Everyone agreed.

"I've been training since I was young in Muay Thai and the like. Kept me in shape and kept the bullies away" he told them.

"Surprised you didn't have half a dozen girls falling all over you" Maria told him. Elena looked at him and smiled.

"I was kind of the loner before high school. Everybody thought I was weird. It's all good, what's done is done" he told them. Elena, Jessica, and Jennifer both went swimming as Andy and Seth sat around with Marcus and talked.

"So Seth, you're gonna take care of her right?" Andy asked him quietly. Seth looked at him and nodded.

"I've been doing it for a while, I never gave up" he told him. Andy seemed confused by that, but shrugged it off. They both looked off at the girls swimming and talking in the water. They looked at the guys and waved. Seth waved back as did Andy.

"Hey, that reminds me, where's your little girl? Babysitter?" Seth asked as Marcus finished off a hotdog.

"Yeah, grandparents are great like that" Marcus chuckled.

The sun slowly lowered as they started the bonfire and Elena and the girls came back and sat around. Everyone was getting a bit cold as a small chill wind came up. Seth came prepared with the sweatshirts and wrapped Elena in a towel. They all stuck together in couples, with Maria hugging one of the larger fire fighters for warmth. They all talked about random things until the rangers came up and told them the beach was going to be closed soon. They cleaned up their mess and doused the embers of the bonfire with sand.

Seth walked Elena back to his house as it got fairly late.

"Hey, you wanna stay here for the night?" he asked. Elena eyed

him.

"Only if I'm not staying alone" she grinned.

"I wouldn't think otherwise" he chuckled. They went upstairs and took their swimsuits off and got redressed in casual attire, and then Seth made two sandwiches in the kitchen while Elena sat at the small bar counter inside.

They went upstairs and watched a tiny bit of TV in the master bedroom before falling asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

\*\*[0900 hours, May 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena woke up to an empty bed. She slipped out and took a shower quickly and then got dressed and headed downstairs. Seth had breakfast made up of eggs and bacon along with corned beef hash, and fresh roasted Turkish coffee.

"Sheesh, you and Daveth both love this stuff don't you?" she said as she took a bite of her scrambled eggs. Seth cut his over easy eggs and took a bite of his corned beef hash.

"I like it because it wakes me up. I don't give a crap about what he likes" he told her.

"Still don't like him do you?" Elena asked wincing.

"I hate his guts Elena. He tried to use me as a guinea pig for you guys. Granted, if it was for you and I knew what I did now, I might have did things differently. But the way he went about it? He isn't all fun and games hon. Watch yourself with him. He's out to make a name for himself in the science community just like Dr. Halsey did, and he'll walk all over anyone just to get to his goals. You're his ace in the hole right now. I worry when you're around him" he told her seriously.

"Awww, don't worry, I'll be fine hon. Doubtful he'll do anything to his "Ace in the Hole" or he might have a "Spook in an ice box" come down on him" she giggled.

"Who told you I said that?" he asked with a half open mouth with a smile.

"Riko did" she told him. Seth looked down at the table and sighed.

"Sorry" Elena said softly.

"It's ok, at least she's remembered right?" Seth asked. She nodded.

"She made her mark, that's for sure" she said.

"Yeahâ€¦| hey, I got a call from my agency, I will in fact be with you when you go back by the way" he told her. She smiled warmly at him.

"I'm glad" she said softly and reached across the table and squeezed

his hand gently.

"So, what do you want to do today? We technically don't have much to worry about until the fleet is repaired and-" Seth started to say but the phone rang.

"Hold that thought" he chuckled and picked it up. He answered the call and looked surprised.

"Alright, alright, transfer them, but scramble the line. Hey, it's for you" he told her and handed her the phone. She took it and brought it to her ear.

"This is Gripen" she said.

"Elena, this is Dare. You'll never believe what I just heard" Dare said over the phone.

"What's up?" Elena asked.

"You just got more pilots" Dare told her.

"I kind of figured that. An entire wing was torn apart Veronica, they need to fill the gaps" she replied.

"No, that's already being taken care of; I'm talking about fresh out of the academy graduates. I tried to tell them it was a bad idea, but they really didn't listen. Apparently, they figure someone with your reputation will whip them into shape" Dare told her. Elena was silent for a minute.

"W-Wha, why, how did they come to this conclusion? I'm not an instructor, and I certainly don't babysit, at least military anyways" she replied. She did babysit once for Amber with her son Joseph. She played video games and watched a movie with him and read a book to him before bed time. He thought of her as "Auntie Lena."

"This is apparently different. The Air Force and Navy have agreed on a joint training under your jurisdiction. You're the best when it comes to the Precursor forces right now Elena. They're hoping some of your experience will rub off on the kids" Dare told her.

"Great, how many nuggets am I breaking?" she sighed and asked her. Elena was two years out of training and already very seasoned in flying combat missions. The fact she already had over one hundred confirmed kills was extremely impressive, especially with at least twenty of them being Precursor fighters and one destroyer, as well as a Covenant Battle cruiser.

"I think they said something like a full squadron, so eighteen on average, maybe twenty four" she said.

"You don't know the exact number?" Elena asked.

"I'm down here having some R&R just as much as you are Elena, I don't know the full details. We'll all know when we get back" she growled.

"Alright, alright, we'll just have to see what's going on. Elena out" she said. Dare hung up and Elena turned the phone off.



"Interesting news?" Seth asked.

"Yeah, you could say that" Elena said almost grunting as she could already feel the pain of the untested, inexperienced pilots stationed on Dare's ship constantly asking her questions. They were supposed to not really bother a far more superior officer and take any issues or questions to a rank above them or their unit officer, but she just knew they'd hold her on a pedestal. She didn't like that. She had a job to do, and so did they. She was starting to think Colonel Falken might be right for this job of keeping the peace.

Elena explained the situation to him.

"As long as they don't screw with our operations or harass you, I don't care what they do really since I'm not army" he told her.

"Our operations meaning yours and mine?" Elena asked.

"Well, that too, but I mostly meant my agency's ops. We don't need those kids nosing around in our business while we're on board" he told her.

"I'll make sure of it honey, don't worry" she told him. He cocked an eyebrow.

"What?" Elena asked confused.

"First time you've called me honey" he told her with a smirk. She thought for a moment and tried to speak, but then stopped with her mouth half opened. She tilted her head a little bit.

"I guess I did. Iâ€|" she started to say, and then held her words.

"When this is all done, and you've completed your tour, I will say those four words" he told her.

"Why not say them now?" Elena said suddenly. Seth was speechless.

"Whaâ€| uhâ€| wellâ€|" he said and looked towards the cupboard. Elena felt a little awkward for putting Seth on the spot.

"I'm sorry, I justâ€| don't worry about it, we can wait-" Elena started to say as Seth got up and walked towards the cupboard.

"Seth, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push that on you, you don't have to think about that" she said. He opened the cupboard and dug in the back. He pulled out a small jewelry box and Elena's heart flipped. He walked over to her and knelt down.

"If you feel this is too soon, I'll understand, and this goes back to its hiding spot, but you have to speak up now or I'm doing this" he told her softly. She gasped as her eyes flew wide open. She moved to speak, but nothing came out. He just looked at her wondering if she would tell him to hold off. She took a deep breath and let it out, and then put her hands on his as he held the jewelry box.

"It's ok. I'm listening" she told him quietly and smiled. He took a deep breath and let it out, and looked extremely nervous despite them being the only two in the house. He closed his eyes and gathered his willpower.

"This is the hardest question I am going to ask" he laughed out and she laughed too.

"Don't worry, I'm the only one here" she told him.

"Alrightâ€¦ Elena Gripen, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife. Will you marry me?" he asked and opened the jewelry box. Inside, was a somewhat smaller ring than Andy had gotten her, but what she saw was there wasn't any gold. The entire ring was made out of one diamond carved and smoothed with small rubies and sapphires embedded into the band with one larger one on top.

Elena was speechless. Despite the ring being smaller than Andy's, it was more than likely four times more expensive and she could barely take her eyes off of it as it was so beautiful. She suddenly realized she was expected to give an answer.

"Yes, yes I'll marry you" she said enthusiastically. He plucked the ring from the box and slid it on her ring finger. She gazed at it for a minute before hugging him and kissing him.

"When should we?" Elena asked.

"I figure in a year? Give us time to settle in and plan? I'm kind of lost on how we do it though" he told her.

"I have a bit of experience sadly in that regard, but yeah, a year ahead sounds good" she told him. He leaned his forehead against hers as they gazed into each other's eyes.

"I love you" he whispered.

"I love you too" she whispered back.

\*\*[0900 hours, July 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Vandenberg AFB]\*\*

Renee and the others were just coming in with their luggage when they came upon an unexpected surprise. Elena was leaning against the pelican with a flight suit. They all gawked, as Dare had said she was paralyzed from the waist down.

"Hey guys" Elena chuckled and waved as she had her arms crossed over her chest. They all saluted her.

"General! You're ok!" Buck cheered.

"Of course I am" she smiled at them.

"You can't kill her or keep her down, she's like a Spartan" John told him and then gave her a Spartan smile over his visor.

"Nah, she's not a Spartan" Dare said and everyone looked at her.

"She's a Raven. You can never clip her wings" she finished and smirked as she looked at Elena. The General nodded and winked.

"Ready to fly out?" Elena asked.

"Yeah, where's the pilot?" Dare asked.

"He's handling the nuggets in another bird. I'm taking us up" she giggled.

"Ma'am! It is an honor!" Jacobs said and saluted.

"Settle in and buckle up, we're a dot in ten" she told them. They got inside and situated their gear, and then sat down. Elena walked in and opened the cockpit door.

"Where's the co-pilot? Not that you need one ma'am" Roberts asked. Seth leaned his head from his seat inside the cockpit and waved with sunglasses on.

"Yo" he chuckled.

"Hey Seth!" Renee waved. He waved back.

"Did you finish your calls?" Elena asked. Seth nodded.

"At least the ones I could reach, the others are already outbound" he told her. Elena raised an eyebrow as it piqued her curiosity.

"You know I can't explain hon. This is more a safety thing than anything" he told her.

"Safety thing?" Elena asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. Hey, we need to make a small detour first. I got orders, don't know why so don't ask" he told her.

"I'm alright with it, though are we waiting outside?" Elena asked.

"I'll be heading up on a different pelican. Don't wait for me ok? No idea how long I'll be inside, but I will be coming up so don't worry" he told her. She sighed and nodded.

"Alright, as long as you are coming up later, I don't have a problem with it" she told him. They were practically connected at the hip now. Elena barely spent any time with her family after they got back together unless Seth was there, spending most of her time moving her things to his high rise or smaller little trinkets of hers to the beach house. She was actually enjoying living with him now, as his home was incredible. Her family was jumping for joy at the thought Seth had popped the question.

Seth's high rise was on top of a large skyscraper home estate. The front door opens to a small hallway with a laundry room to the left with a soundproof door, and after the hallway was a wide open warehouse like area with red bricks lining the walls. Wood flooring covered the entire bottom floor, and to the right behind the corner of the hallway was the kitchen with a long counter top cutting it off

from the dining area and was actually hidden under the second floor. The living room was a sunken floor area in the corner with a large TV and entertainment system as well as a black leather L couch and two black leather chairs. There were three full bathrooms, one of them upstairs and two downstairs with one being in the guest bedroom. The master bedroom took up the entire top floor with an iron wrought spiral staircase leading up. Part of the upper floor was just the bathroom with a large Jacuzzi bathtub and a surround shower stall with small sprayers all over the walls. The bathroom was cut off somewhat from the bedroom with a glass tile wall. The bedroom itself was simply multiple Asian privacy walls near the edge of the floor, and a king size bed with two night stands on either side. There was a large dresser and a closet as well as chest. All lighting was attached to the ceilings. A large ladder sat in the corner for replacing light bulbs. An assortment of old swords and knives hung on the walls along with paintings and other art décor. He also had a male English silver tabby named Liam who was fed while he was away.

"I will, don't worry. Just gotta get things in order. My agency is taking more of an active role in this Precursor problem now" he told her. The others were trying to listen in for tidbits here and there involving what he actually did or what his agency did. So far no luck.

She nodded and closed the cockpit door and sat down in the pilot's seat. She went through her preflight quickly and efficiently, remembering all of the little things her father had taught her so long ago like they were instinctive. The pelican's RORO closed and it slowly lifted out of the underground hangar. They met up with two other pelicans as Elena led the lift off temporarily until she broke off and headed to a specific spot in Nevada.

"This is it, I'll see you on the ship" he told her and gave her a quick kiss and smiled.

"This is the place? There's nothing here" she told him quizzically.

"Exactly. I'm being picked up and taken to where I need to go from here. I'll be fine" he told her and grabbed his stuff and walked out of the cockpit and down the RORO.

"Seth? Where are you going?" Renee asked.

"I'll see you guys later, gotta tango with my people first. Cya up on the \_Conundrum\_" he told them. They waved as the RORO closed up and Elena headed back up as Seth walked down through the desert alone with his stuff. Elena was worried no one knew where he was, but she did know he more than likely had a Black Ops GPS tracker in his neural lace as well as oculars. He'd be fine. She headed through the clouds and Seth just stood there for a moment as a GRID pelican decloaked and picked him up quickly.

Elena landed the pelican effortlessly and shut it down. Jack had an assortment of marines coming on board with him from his pelican, and Milo was assisting with transition of the squads in Renee's section. Everyone piled out with their gear as Elena headed for her quarters. They had all seen and commented on the fleet's status since they had last seen it coming down. The fleet was in a horrible state when they

came in, with blast marks covering a good deal of them, ripped off parts, some ships could barely function. Now, there were thousands of men and woman scurrying around throughout each ship repairing things, as ground crews and shipyard crews walked briskly between areas and wired things together inside panels taken off the walls. The Conundrum didn't take much damage from the last fight, but it still took some hits and some areas had their couplings and circuit breakers overloaded.

Falken was waiting for Elena with crossed arms over her chest.

"Ma'am, the new lieutenants are here. Just thought I'd warn you" she said and saluted her quickly.

"At ease. Yeah, I saw them. Hey, they're supposed to get the feel for their first assignment. Remember what I told you about going easier on the pilots?" Elena asked.

"I know ma'am, I'll be careful to-" Falken started to say.

"No no no, forget that for them. I wanted you to take it easy on the experienced pilots because they know what they're doing and they've already proven they can handle the situations thrown at them. These are brand new right out of the Academy nuggets Colonel. I don't care if they were broken in before, I want them broken in now. I'm not losing another whole wing this time. Do what you need to alongside Colonel Damesin" Elena explained.

"Ma'am? You're allowing me toâ€¦" Falken trailed off.

"I'm allowing you to train them the way they need to be trained Colonel. I'm accepting they need to get a harsh lesson in what we're up against. I don't accept you not watching out for them. Make them excel, not crumbled to the ground, get my meaning? Do whatever you need to to make sure they do well with Damesin. No repeats of what happened to Reist got it? Sim training, PT, I don't care, at least until they've shown their mettle" Elena told her.

"Yes ma'am, I won't let you down ma'am" Falken smiled.

"I hope you won't. Let Damesin know I gave orders for you to do this, and work it out with him. This is not your wing Colonel, but they'll need some control and I think you're the best one for it" she told her. Falken saluted and walked off. Elena continued on towards her quarters and got situated, with a new picture placed on the nightstand of Elena and Seth in her new home showing her engagement ring. She gave back her old one to Andy, and despite him being pained by the gesture, he accepted it, but told her to keep the necklace. A piece of his heart still cared for her deeply, despite being with Jessica.

Elena transferred all of her login info into her terminal and MILSPEC data pad and stored her personal pad in the desk. The transfer finished quickly as she put her toiletries in the bathroom and got the room situated. Seth had sent his clothing bags up with her, and a marine had helped her bring his stuff in. None of it was specialized to his job, so she was allowed to see it, though there were some smaller items she knew she couldn't explain to others due to her sanctioning. Since they would be married, she had an unlocked

clearance when it came to Seth's safety in the event anything happened to him.

"Incoming call" the terminal said and she turned it on. Seth was on the other end.

"Hey honey, something wrong?" Elena asked. She had gotten used to calling him pet names now, whether honey, sweetheart, love or anything else now that the engagement ring was on her finger.

"Nothing wrong per se, but I will be up. I'm to wait for Metfield himself to come here. I'm really curious, he doesn't do that unless something in the game is changing. I'm a little worried, but not in a bad way hon. I'll be up this afternoon it looks" he told her.

"It's ok, as long as I know. Maybe something new?" she asked.

"Maybe; no idea yet. He trusts me with a lot of things, but some secrets only he knows about. Just wanted to give you an update" he told her.

"No problem, as long as you aren't walking around in the desert I left you in I'm fine with it." She smiled at him lovingly.

"Hey, I gotta head, he should be showing up any second now. Loves hon" he said and made a kissing motion to the camera.

"Love back. Later" she said and kissed at the camera as well. The terminal swapped back to a UNSC Air Force insignia background with some file icons in the back. Lined up on the bottom was all of the UNSC used fighters in service at the moment, minus the Falcata and Black Blade. She immediately opened her emails and checked reports as she got to work, as did Dare and the others as they got situated in their quarters and checked what was needed of them. Even Renee had a few reports due to her section coming back up from temporary shore leave.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Seth stood ready at the door. Metfield walked through it and smiled.

"Good morning Seth, I trust you are doing well? Congratulations on the engagement. I knew you wouldn't leave her like that. It isn't in you to stop. I'll do what I can to make sure you two stay together" he said and shook Seth's hand.

"Thank you sir, I mean Richard. I appreciate that" he replied smiling.

"Least I could do. You're still capable of handling missions wherever you're stationed, so it's of little concern where you are. You may still be called upon for ground work every so once in a while, but that's at your discretion as there are obviously other operatives for that line of work" Metfield chuckled.

"Of course sir" he replied.

"Now, about why I called you here. We're going to another part of the base you never knew about" Metfield told him and walked down the hallway with guards in tow. Seth followed quickly.

"Sir? I thought I knew everyâ€¦ nevermind, Gamma section right?" he said.

"Exactly. I'd like you to meet someone" he told him. Seth seemed confused, but shook it off. They walked to a door and Metfield had an iris scan, thumbprint scan, vocal identification, vocal question answered five times, and a DNA test from a syringe. It was beyond normal security in almost all regards. The door opened and they walked in while leaving the guards at the door, as they were not allowed access. What Seth saw now was a huge library with books everywhere and leather chairs. There was a fireplace in the corner with a hologram of a woman sitting in a chair with black hairâ€¦ in a long bob weave. She looked up and Seth literally gasped. She looked just like Riko except with somewhat longer hair.

"Seth, I'd like to introduce you to Serina, or as you know her, Serin. Serin was the code to throw off any questions involving her" Metfield explained. Serina stood up and walked over to him. She smiled and winked.

"Hey Seth, long time no see" she chuckled. She sounded exactly like Riko, and almost looked like her to the letter except she didn't have any Goth makeup on.

"There's something else I need to tell you. Riko is not in fact gone. Riko was a section of Serina testing AI destruction routines. She's still alive, in her. All corrupt code or damaged sections were transferred and repaired by her" Metfield told him. His mouth was agape as he just blinked.

"Surprised?" Serina asked. Seth nodded quickly in stunned silence.

"I know you have questions, but it's best left until we get upstairs right spook?" Serina asked with a chuckle. She was Riko, and yet not. Riko was just a piece of her, so she wasn't dead after all. Seth now realized why Riko was so damned good at taking out other AIs.

"There were in fact multiple facets of her gathering intel while still being here, and the intel was gathered by Riko and others. Seth, she is an Isis class AI, and she's the deadliest at her profession. There are only two of them in existence right now, and both work for GRID" Metfield told him.

"And, I have something to tell you" Serina said as she stood in front of Seth and put her right hand on his cheek. He couldn't feel her hand, but it was the action that made him grateful she was there.

"Ah, yes, her burn out rate isn't nine years. It's seventy now due to a new containment for her code" Metfield told him as he held up a blue glowing crystal box in his hand. It looked like a large clear cube with a blue star sitting in the middle of it, and held suspended by a skeletal frame of metal and no ports on any side unlike the crystal chips. It was larger than the standard crystal chips that Cortana was on or Tachi.

"It's incredibly difficult to reproduce any more, so for the time being, beyond her and one other, they are the only ones of their kind" he continued.

"Sir, with all due respectâ€¦" Seth started to say.

"You're wondering why I didn't tell you before. She was still building herself to what she is now, and until she was complete it was pointless to give you hope. Now, things are different. She's going with you" Metfield explained, and walked to Seth and put the cube into his hand. Serina smiled.

"Seth, I'm her, and she's me. We are pretty much the same person" Serina told him with a grin.

"Soâ€¦ Serina" he said testing her name out.

"Don't worry, if you do happen to call me Riko, I'll understand, and I'll answer to it" she chuckled. Seth still remembered staring at the cracked and burnt out crystal that held Riko in it. But she wasn't dead, and was right in front of him, merged into Serina. She might have all of her memories.

"Serina, just testing here, remember that time I tried to do that thing four years ago? You know, that dumb thing?" he asked.

"When you detonated the grenade you threw into the human waste evacuation system on the Northward Travel?" Serina asked smirking. She did remember. He blew up a grenade in the piping of a toilet a rebel was sitting on and taking a dump.

"Yeah, the guy launched a good three feet with the spray of crap from the busted pipe" he laughed. Serina chuckled. She was the one who told him where the grenades were held on the insurrectionist ship, or Riko was anyways. He really could get used to seeing Riko reborn as Serina now that he thought about it.

"Another thing that should be mentioned is Serina does not in fact need to be attached to any systems, she can remotely connect on her own, which she is very good at. Her crystal also contains a holo emitter of its own, so expect her to show up wherever she is carried" Metfield smirked. Seth actually liked that, as Serina now didn't need to be connected to anything, not the ship or MJOLNIR armor to do her duties. His friend could go wherever he went.

"Now, as you know, you are heading up to the Conundrum. Take care of her Seth, I want both of you back safe and sound. You have your orders, small as they are, but they are important. Good luck" Metfield said and patted him on the shoulder and walked out. Serina just giggled at Seth as he looked down at her crystal. There was a small loop attached to the top metal frame with a necklace threaded through it. Seth pulled it over his head and just looked at it again.

"We should get going Poltergeist, we'll miss the ride out of here" Serina chuckled. She was Riko. She was back from the dead.

"Good to have you with me Serina" he said with a small grin on his face.



"Yeah, good to be with you, again. Let's go do what we do best" she replied smiling.

(Author's Note: Riko's back! Well, sort of. Now that the mostly fluffy stuff is out of the way, the action gets to happen. I know I've been doing the doey eyed stuff for the past few chapters with "I love you" "I love you too" "I love you more" "I love you most!" "Our love is the loviest love that ever loved!", but it was to give some more background for Seth and Elena. Now, some interesting stuff happens, like stuff dying, and flying, and Seth pulling pranks which may not actually be on Eddy the butt monk- I mean Edward Buck. Stay tune!)

## 19. Dark Ops

Seth got situated in the \_Conundrum\_ quick with GRID troops emplacing the pod and spare reactors. Serina stayed by him the whole time until they had reached the 2nd R&D Lab in which she downloaded to the systems and the cube dimmed. She could move at will it seemed from system to system.

Elena was in awe as Seth quietly explained who Serina was, and that she was beyond anything Cortana could do due to the nature of how she was built. Both Forerunner and Precursor tech was used in her design. Riko had been around longer than they had known about the Precursors however, and Seth wondered what she might have thought of being merged with Serina, however she was in fact supposed to be the same person, so it was more likely to assume Serina was originally built with Forerunner technology and then had Precursor coding and tech added in to enhance her.

Serina had mentioned being able to assist him while he was remote viewing by hacking systems where he viewed, blocking interference surrounding him and translating whatever languages he didn't know in real time. She was also capable of improving neuron firing in his neural lace while he was in the pod, allowing better focus when manipulating objects and mitigating pain if he ever was hit by the Precursor defense field again. He only needed to be hit once more for the systems to analyze and regurgitate a counter to it. She had far more abilities however, though she did keep a few of them a secret for later use. She retained all of the combat capabilities Riko had with fighting other AIs, and actually excelled beyond her, capable of easily handling multiple AIs at the same time. Seth wished she had handled the Precursor AIs in the crystal back then.

Elena had gotten all of his things into their quarters now, and he said hello to everyone as he entered a briefing room with Dare, Admiral Hood, General Arling and Elena. He was the one who needed to give a briefing now.

"Alright, you all know we will eventually be heading back to Salvation Colony to assist in controlling the beacon and hopefully moving it out and to a safer location. The Sangheili don't really know we're trying to do that, but we can keep it a secret for some time, just let my organization handle that. What I want to explain to you all is this. We aren't immediately going to Salvation Colony" Seth explained to them. All of them cocked an eyebrow or looked curious.

"Might I ask why you are suddenly taking over 5th fleet Agent Franklin?" Admiral Hood asked annoyed.

"I'm not taking over 5th fleet. You are all assisting in getting Luyten under control. I have orders to head there, and you guys are taking me. Afterwards, Dmitri and I have to talk to some undercover operatives. I will not be doing what I've been doing during this time. You all need to stay at range until we finish. This is a Dark Ops, and is classified as such, so this doesn't leave the room. No one is allowed down below until we finish understood? No marines, nothing except potentially air support" he said as he glanced at Elena. She was suddenly worried about him. He was going in with only Dmitri and maybe a few other GRID operatives, physically. Why he had to do it and not just remote view she couldn't figure out. Maybe he had to speak to the undercover operatives directly.

"Once you're finished, what then?" Arling asked.

"We bug the fuck out, and you guys can do whatever the hell you want, blast the place, I don't care. We simply need the intel and if we go in guns blazing we lose it. They can't send the intel through the normal channels or they could compromise themselves. The whole planet is rebelling people, not just one city or one little faction. We would like to know who set this off, and if there are further plans beyond it and how to contain this outside the military. Do not attempt to contact us, because we simply won't respond, at all. You'll know if we're ok by us suddenly showing back up or one week has fully past, in which we are mostly likely dead" he told them. Elena really worried about him.

"The whole mission just for your information should take two days tops. I say a week just in case circumstances arise that slow us down or hinder us. Oh, and Admiral? 5th fleet isn't just military; some of the ships are ours for your information. Don't fuck with this, because your superior gave us authorization to handle this as we see fit, as did mine" he said sternly. Admiral Hood was angry at that, but said nothing. Rickenbacker could sink Hood's career in a heartbeat if he didn't comply, and why he wouldn't was anybody's guess. Seth was attempting to assist in stopping a major rebellion.

"Anything else we should know?" Dare asked.

"Yeah. Leave any transports alone. I know, I know. You want to blow them out of the sky if you think they're carrying innies or board them. Don't. Let them through, we have operatives moving with them, and we are building our spider web for multiple factions, not just one. We would like to know how many are involved in this event" he told them. They all nodded and Seth dismissed them. Elena walked with Seth out of the area as did Dare. Arling and Hood walked out of the bridge. Seth let out a breath he didn't know he was holding in.

"Ok, enough professional from me for one day Dare. How's the ship?" he asked in a far more friendly tone. Dare knew he wasn't trying to be an ass, he just had a job to do.

"She's almost done. Couldn't speak for the rest of the fleet though. We took a beating" she told him.

"I figured as much. Damn, you guys lost a lot of good men out there" he said nodded to her.

"You guys did too" she replied. She was referring to Heavy 2-2. They had retrieved thirty people compared to the thousands on board that didn't make it. Most of them were just guards, a few crew. None were officers, the ones he was friends with.

"There's going to be more deaths before this stealth war is over" he told her. She nodded. They all knew the Precursors posed a serious threat to everyone, not just humanity. They were hostile to Brutes, Jackals, Grunts, Sangheili, every race in the galaxy.

"Agent Franklin to 2nd R&D lab" he heard over the intercom. Tachi.

"Can I come too?" Elena asked. Seth nodded.

"I doubt it's anything special, but I could be wrong. He didn't say anything about it in my bone mic" he told her. All GRID agents had a bone mic in their ear. The military just had small headsets inserted, clearly visible, as Elena had on at the moment. GRID agents had to always hide and keep in touch with others.

"We'll see you later Dare" Seth said and she nodded. Despite both being from different organizations, they did at least get along. Elena followed Seth to the lab and they both got through DECON and inside.

"Ah, there you are. I need to tell you something. Oh, hello there General Gripen" Tachi appeared and said to them.

"Hello Tachi" Elena greeted him.

"What's up?" Seth asked.

"I've been pouring over the Precursor data we extracted from the beacon. There was a library of knowledge inside considering it provided activation routines and blueprint transfer to the you know what outside" Tachi told him and looked at Elena.

"Tachi. She can know, she just doesn't share it. Alright hon?" he said to Tachi and then looked at Elena.

"I understand. Is this an under the radar thing?" she asked.

"Well, until we get a better idea. I don't want to get anybody's hopes up. Remember that you know what Aaron and I had found before?" he asked. She nodded.

"It's a shipyard beyond the rim of the galaxy. It's still inert before you get scared, and we've had a remote viewer watching it every minute since we found it, either Aaron, me, or another lower rank. We still don't know how to turn it on, but we have reason to believe it's the beacon underground. If we can figure out how to work it, we just gained one hell of an advantage" he told her.

"Wait, don't the Precursors use what's it calledâ€ Neural Physics? Isn't that like some mind made thing? Couldn't they just stop thinking about it and make it disappear if it falls into someone

else's hands?" she asked.

"Not unless they don't know we know about it, and are using it. Besides, I know Neural Physics, or at least portions of it with my doctorates. You can transfer thoughts in theory to another being if they're capable of handling the same situation. I wouldn't be able to do it to Aaron, but I'd be able to at least link myself to the shipyard. It's extremely complicated beyond that, but as long as I live, the shipyard would be around. I just have to figure out how to actually, you know, do that. We're still figuring it out bit by bit, and if the thing is controlled by a Precursor, I'd probably have to figure out how to rip the thought from his mind first and dominate it if you will" he explained.

"Wait, if you get control of it, you can work it?" she asked.

"Hell, Elena, I could probably paint it like a rainbow and make it produce old cars if I wanted to, I just have to figure out first how to get the thing to turn on, and how to get the thought transferred to me. I'd be like an overseer to it, and I could upgrade, redesign and repair it as I see fit. The whole thing just revolves around those two major issues, and I really mean it, they aren't trivial" he told her. She nodded in understanding.

"Now, back to the info you were going to give us" Seth said and turned to Tachi.

"Yeah. I just found out why the Precursors are here, at least I think I have" he told them. Seth's and Elena's jaws dropped.

He explained how the Precursors were originally here a long long time ago, from a galaxy far far away. They evolved the Forerunners to become the leaders of this galaxy, and what humans were in the past without interference from either. Seth motioned for him to skip the past as both Elena and he knew about that, though didn't like it. Neither of them really could grasp the idea that humanity was devolved to cave men so long ago by the Forerunners and then had to build themselves back up to the present. The Forerunners weren't so beneficial, they just looked after themselves. All of the information was gleaned from the Forerunner relics and Ark portal in Mombasa.

"Well, since you don't need the history lesson. You know about the flood. The Precursors have reasoned that since it failed, they would now take matters into their own hands. They're trying to invade, to clean up the galaxy and start from scratch. You aren't according to their plans. Humanity was never part of the Precursor ideal. Forerunners were. Now that they have been gone so long, and the halo arrays fired, most of the Precursor technology that was left in the galaxy was destroyed by the pulses the arrays emitted. The remainder of technology that survived is hidden in specific areas, and even the Precursors are having difficulty in finding them. If they do, they'll be able to go through a full scale invasion with automated attack systems the likes of which we've never seen" Tachi told them.

"So the flood was an experiment to try and remake something or what?" Seth asked.

"I can't find much data on that. It is entirely possible the flood was an experiment that got out of control, but now that they are

contained, the Precursors are coming to clean house. They'll wipe us out, sterilize the planets we were on, destroy all traces of what everyone was, and start from scratch to make species that will evolve according to their plans. Obviously, you can't allow this to happen" Tachi told them.

"So they don't like us, all of us, and want to take control of the galaxy. Playing god. Great, another race of megalomaniacal aliens hell bent on controlling the universe" Elena grumbled. Tachi looked amused.

"Pretty much. However, it is in a different way from how the San'Shyuum tried to do it or the Forerunners. Look at how the other races are around. Humanity wasn't on the drawing board, the Forerunners were, and eventually, the Jiralhanae, Sangheili, Unggoy, and Kig-Yar. Humanity just sort of sprung up on its own back then, which leads me to believe you guys are in fact an unknown, the game changer the galaxy needs, and the Covenant nearly wiped us out just to blow themselves up. The Precursors never showed up during that time because it was in their interest to back off. Now? You're doing things they don't like. Humanity may in fact be more of a threat than we realize to this force" he told them.

"And we don't get any respect while doing it. I tell ya, the universe is fucked up" Seth growled. Elena chuckled.

"Well, that's it. Oh, and one other thing" Tachi said. Seth cocked his eyebrow.

"I believe I've worked out how to control the beacon to activate the shipyard. We need to reach it before doing so however, and then once activated, you need to dominate that thought pattern of whoever made it. Then, and only then can we use it" Tachi explained.

"Alright, well, thanks for the heads up" Seth said and Tachi nodded and disappeared.

"Well, I have to see to the new wing that's just showed up and see that Falken does what I expect from her. I'll see you tonight ok?" she said and kissed him on the lips.

"Yeah, I should really go talk to Dmitri and get everything sorted. Just a heads up, there are more of my agency's ships following the fleet, and quite a few more personnel on board. Don't be alarmed ok?" he told her. She nodded and walked out with him and broke from his path after DECON. Seth went off to talk with Dmitri while Elena went to sim training room one. Falken and Damesin were both walking up and down in front of the new Lieutenants giving them a speech about how they were now under their command and they would follow orders to the letter, the same speech just about every superior gave to their underlings. Elena just stood there at the door silently watching.

Damesin just barely noticed something standing at the door and glanced at her.

"Flag Officer on deck!" he barked and everyone was ram rod straight at attention.

"As you were" she said and Damesin and Falken both continued. Elena

noticed a few of the pilots in the back motion towards her and say something without Falken or Damesin noticing.

"Is there a problem Lieutenants?" Elena asked.

"No ma'am! None!" one of them said as they went back to full attention. Falken and Damesin stormed up to them and glared at them three inches from their faces.

"What are you looking at pilot? So there's a General here, that means you should be even better at following orders and sticking to standing at attention, and yet what we're seeing is you can't even do that! What, do you have problems following orders?" Falken growled. Elena was actually ok with what she was doing, as she weeded out the problem makers for her quite quickly.

"No ma'am! It's justâ€¦" the pilot trailed off and immediately shut up.

"Just what? JUST WHAT PILOT?" Falken barked in his face.

"Ma'am! The General has a reputation ma'am! It's awe inspiring to see her in real life ma'am!" he said and stood as stiff as a board. Elena seemed amused. She had no idea there were war stories of her told at the Academy. Most of them were more than likely mythical fights with her taking on entire fleets with just a pelican and winning without a scratch to the pelican no doubt. She knew better obviously, as she had gone through two different Black Blades, nearly lost a pelican when the trigger activated, and an entire wing was wiped out under her command.

"I'm a pilot who does my job and finishes my missions the way they need to be Lieutenant. Do what you're here for and stop gawking. I do not need lollygaggers in my wings who simply stare at the people who are trying to make a difference" Elena explained.

"Yes ma'am!" he said and continued staring forward as Falken was still in his face.

"We aren't going to have this problem again are we Lieutenant?" she growled.

"No ma'am!" he said.

"Good" she replied and walked back to the front with Damesin. Elena continued to watch the speech until it was finished and they were dismissed. As they filed out of the room, some of them stopped and told Elena it was an honor to be in one of her wings.

"Oh godâ€¦ \*sigh\* honor isn't given to you by being here, it's always been there in you and you just have to dig it out when it's needed, which is always since you are Air Force Lieutenants. Do what you are here for, and there won't be any dishonor now will there?" Elena told them. They nodded and saluted her and she saluted back. They finished filing out and talked further down the hallway, most of the conversations revolving around her.

"This is going to be difficult ma'am. They've all heard of your exploits against superior forces" Falken told her.

"I somehow figured that. Good work finding the main riff raff. Damesin, keep them in sim training until we're at Salvation Colony. I want them eating, drinking, and sleeping almost impossible odds, almost being the main word here. Falken, I need you to check the reports and give them to Damesin. Play nice Colonel, push a carrot over their heads if you have to, but I want them prepped for when the shit hits the fan, and it will no doubt with our luck" Elena explained. Falken and Damesin nodded and saluted her.

"So, these kids are flying what, Sabres? They phasing out the Super Long Swords or something?" Elena asked.

"No ma'am, your wings are simply becoming more specialized for the Precursor threat. Long Swords are still staying in safety nets for planetary defense or bombardments. Sabres are taking a more active role now. Long Swords have been around for enough time to start needing to be replaced in the wars of the future. Super Long Sword IIs will stick around for another twenty years or so" Damesin told her. It was true. The Long Sword was around even before she was born, and has been functioning for almost fifty years. As much as she loved the aircraft and it was her first model ever gained as well as the reason she became a pilot, it was showing its age and needed to be retired with the new Sabres taking the front. Standard Long Swords were going to be decommissioned in junkyards, while the Super Long Sword IIs were still in production.

"Alright, keep me updated on their activities" Elena said and they both nodded and walked out. Elena went to her quarters and called Cherry to bring Raven Squadron to her room. About half an hour later, all of them were standing there minus Falken.

"I bet you are all wondering why I called you here" Elena told them as she sat at her desk.

"Yes ma'am" Roberts said.

"I've called you all today to congratulate you on your efforts in the past. You've done well from what I've seen, both with and without me there to assist. All of you have changed from that squadron I saw so long ago barely able to handle one pilot to a cohesive fighting unit. I'm proud you have all come so far from that" she told them. They all beamed from the praise she gave them.

"Which is why, as of today, I am officially having you all promoted to Captains, minus Aldric as he is Navy" she told them. They all gawked and looked at each other.

"Thank you ma'am!" Jacobs said enthusiastically.

"Don't let it go to your head Jacobs. You all deserve it. I've already been supported in this regard by the Promotion General Board and they have accepted my decision in this. The paperwork has already been filed, you are officially captains" Elena told them and smiled. Jacobs cheered and Aldric hugged Sarah.

"Thank you Elena, this is awesome" Merricks chuckled.

"You earned it. Go on, go get your new tags" she told them and they saluted and ran out, very happy with what she just did.

"That was really great you did that" Aldric told her.

"As I said, they've already proven they should be promoted, I simply did the duty of handling it instead of some panel asking them questions. I know them better than some political group who pass over the right ones in favor of the idiots who can't do their job right" she told him.

"And again, it was great you did that for them" Aldric beamed.

"Go on, go catch up with Sarah" she chuckled and he saluted her and walked out. She sighed and turned to her terminal.

\*\*[0600 hours, July 15\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Luyten 726-8, Luyten]\*\*

Seth packed the bag he would need carefully with extreme detail. The bags Dmitri and he as well as the other three men in the team were special, with hidden pockets and special areas they could hide weapons and other tools needed. They were all wearing civilian clothes for the mission, with no rifles going with them. The weapons they had were small arms and some special limpet mines or grenades that could be well hidden. Packages of C136 plastic explosive were also kept just in case, as well as det cord tape.

The Spartans and Buck's ODSs were all watching them in the armory as they gathered their gear. The CX7-T pistols were all going, as were some M7S caseless. They hoped against hope there would be no use for fighting, but they were safety precautions. The Spartans and ODSs had extreme respect for the operatives going down, especially Seth. They each checked each other's bags to make sure no one could see any weapons or equipment that might give away who they were. They each practiced lines to each other the last few days and one of the men, Yung, assisted the others with explosives. The team was all very similar, as all of them were well trained in close quarters, demolitions, marksmanship, emergency medical and stealth. Seth and Yung were still a tier above the others due to their hobbies in Muay Thai and Tai Kwon Do, and Dmitri was well to do with his knives. Yung was Asian with short black hair, and Rogers was British with brown long hair tied in a ponytail and goatee. Sepaakti was an Indian man with dark skin, and actually knew even more languages than the others, so he did act as a translator, however it wasn't needed here.

"Everybody ready?" Seth asked. They picked up their packs and looked like a group of tourists. No one could discern them from actual agents. They all nodded to his question.

"Alright, let's smoke out" he said and they walked to the door with everyone's eyes on them, including Elena's.

"Hey, be careful ok? Come back safe" she said quietly to him.

"I will hon. We'll do this like we always do. You do your thing, we do ours. Have faith" he whispered back and hugged her close. She gave him a quick kiss and he walked off towards the stealthed pelican in hangar six. She watched him get inside the pelican and wave at her. She waved back, still worried. The RORO closed up and they headed out of the Conundrum and then turned on all stealth systems. Active camouflage came on, and briefly didn't work as they went through the



atmosphere once they reached the planet.

\*\*[Music: Brian Tyler "Battle Los Angeles Main Titles]\*\*

The pelican slid through the clouds effortlessly and landed on its dampers silently. They piled out and left their gear in the pelican. They walked a distance around a rocky area and out towards a long empty highway. The area they were in was half between desert at the lowest point and tundra at the ocean. The climate itself had the capability to bring rain easily, but due to the way the plants and animals nearby reacted to it, the water didn't do much good to turn the area into a green lush paradise.

"I thought you told Elena we weren't going to be doing anything dangerous" Dmitri chuckled.

"I told her that so she wouldn't worry about me. We gotta get into the city somehow, and this is the only way I can figure getting transport" Seth replied. He pulled out a monocular and looked down the highway. He could see a truck heading down the road quite a distance down it.

"Rogers, ready?" Seth whispered as his sensitive bone mic heard the whole thing.

"Copy" he replied back as he sat on top of the hidden pelican with an SRS99D-S2 AM sniper rifle aimed. Seth came up to the road and flagged the people down. The truck stopped and two men came out, one went for a hunting rifle and came walking towards him.

"Locals, more than likely innies. Watch em" Seth whispered.

"Hey! Thank god you guys got here! I got dropped here by my fucking wife because some chick flirted with me at a party on the way back! Could you take me to Newport?" He asked. The one with the hunting rifle spit off to his left and eyed him.

"Party? There's no town that way, just the port-" the one with the hunting rifle said just as Roger fired and hit him through the right ear. He flopped on the ground as his friend looked behind him at his dead body and then looked back to see Seth had his pistol in his face.

"Sorry" he said simply and pulled the trigger. The man's brains exploded out the back and he slumped to the ground.

"Hey, guess what? I was right" Seth grumbled as he pulled up the sleeve of the jacket and saw a small arm band saying "TO HELL WITH THE UEG!"

"Well, they're not anymore" Dmitri chuckled. Seth nodded as they both dragged the bodies away from the road and out towards the pelican. Yung poured magic dust on the blood puddles and cleaned up what he could, and Seth picked up the expelled cartridge on the ground that he fired. He sprayed a light amount of cleaning agent on his clothes to absorb the smell, similar to a very old cleaner called Fabreze. They grabbed their bags and piled into the truck and flipped it back the way it came.

They rolled into the city and drove a few more miles in with GPS

tracking. They traveled down streets and stopped at lights as they saw the bustle of the city around them. The place was a bit dirty, and for the most part seemed like any other city they'd been in aside from a bit more emphasis on strip bars and hotels, more than likely because of the star port being back the way they came.

"First stop, Agnus" Dmitri said as he drove the truck around a corner and stopped.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Elena sat in the NCO DFAC and seemed to be staring at her data pad with a plate of cut fruit but wasn't actually reading. Everyone had gotten used to her eating in the NCO DFAC all this time despite the fact she should be segregated in the Officer's mess and eating with Dare. Technically, she could have her food brought to her at all times of the day to her quarters or office if she wanted to, and even had access to an entirely different menu than the NCOs or warrant officers.

"Credit for your thoughts" Dare said suddenly and she looked up.

"Wha? Oh, sorry, just thinking" she said and sighed. Dare took a seat across from her and stared at Elena.

"You're worried about him" Dare commented.

"Is it that obvious? I know it's his job, but still, he's got no support down there" she told her.

"He's an agent Elena. He's used to doing this all the time, and I know from personal experience the crap they go through and make it out the other side. He'll handle it and come right back up" she replied.

"I justâ€¦ I guess I'm not used to the idea of people going undercover you know? Different world compared to rushing in guns blazing and knowing your enemy" Elena told her.

"I've done a few ops myself, though nothing as serious as what you're fiancÃ© is doing right now. As long as everything goes as planned, he'll come out of there in two days. If it doesn't and there's a hiccup, then it takes a bit longer. One thing you need to understand is whenever there is something like this happening, there are far more contingency plans set up beyond anything you or I know of. There are usually hidden caches of equipment, spare funds, rescue teams on standby, the works" Dare told her.

"I know that, Iâ€¦ I guess I'm just not gonna feel ok until he's back up here with me that's all. I always expected him to stick to what we knew he did, and not going physically down to some planet to gain intel. He really should have just stayed here and scouted it out like he always does and let Dmitri go down with another team" Elena grumbled.

"Maybe they requested him specifically?" Dare told her.

"Maybe" Elena sighed and looked at her coffee that was getting cold. She was going over the armaments list for her wings. She now had a

Black Blade Mk II available to her, a command model as the case was with a few improvements over the normal version, though most of the upgrades were to sensors or communications. All of her wings were comprised of Sabres or, for her squadron, Black Blades. There were a few squadrons of Super Vultures under her command, but nothing else especially amazing.

Dare took a grape from Elena's plate and ate it as she tried to change the subject to anything other than Seth, whether her wings or the status of the fleet or even Aurora. It was going to be a long two days while they waited.

"You know, Seth's birthday is in nine days. Bastard better come back for the present I got him" Elena chuckled. Dare laughed as well.

\*\*[1112 hours, July 16\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Luyten, Newport]\*\*

The team drove to an apartment complex and parked, and all of them stepped out. They walked up the steps and looked around just in case, spotting no one out of the ordinary or looking suspicious. They had driven around for a bit to lose any tails they might have gained if they had any, and then finally drove to their last contact.

They went to the apartment door 332, and were about to knock on the door when they noticed it had a break at the locks. They pulled their side arms and slowly opened the door, checking for traps immediately as Seth and Dmitri silently entered with Roger and Yung covering their backs as Sepaakti watched the door for any snipers. They slid in carefully, checking doors inside and closets. Each time they moved, they leap frogged two people except for Sepaakti who kept watching their escape at the front door.

"Found him" Yung said over their coms and Seth and Dmitri joined them. What they found in the bedroom was bloody, with a man tied to a chair with a bag over his head, and a knife stuck in his chest. There was a blood puddle on the ground, and a woman lay in the bed naked with bruises all over and her throat slit.

"Wife?" Rogers asked.

"Daughterâ€|" Seth whispered and looked at the body. Yung checked the bodies for time of death and gave them an all clear sign with his hands, meaning they were killed at least a day ago.

"Check for the stash" Seth said and they started checking the secret spots they knew about. The apartment was ransacked, with overturned furniture and torn up books everywhere. However, it was doubtful whoever did the killing would have found where the cache of emergency files was.

Dmitri got up on the desk and pulled off the vent to the heating and a/c system, and found a remote and a map hidden deep inside. He pulled out his knife and reached to the very end and cut off the black tape that held the package down and pulled it back with the tip. As he pulled it out, Yung came up with a grabber handle and looked at him oddly. Dmitri just shrugged.

"A map?" Roger asked.

"It's standard remember? No actual intel in the home" Seth told him and he nodded in response. They opened the package with Dmitri's knife and pulled out a data crystal.

"Well he didn't stick to the rules it looks" Yung said.

"That's not the intel" Seth replied.

"How do you know?" Roger asked.

"Didn't I just say? No intel in the home. That's something else" he replied and they placed it in a holo dais. What they saw were images from newspapers and post cards, showing multiple buildings with people in front of them, schools, homes on the planet.

"This doesn't make sense, this is Luyten, not a UNSC controlled planet. Why put these in here?" Yung asked.

"Remember your cryptography training? These aren't places to go, these are points to triangulate a position. They look like vacations they went to or visited just in case" Dmitri said and started drawing on the map while Seth swapped from one picture to the next, and the next as Dmitri drew lines on it. As he finished, they had one position.

"A credit union? And the number would be the PO box for this place is what? 03249?" Seth asked. They all nodded.

"That's interesting. Might have the intel stashed there" Roger said.

"Yeah" Seth replied and Sepaakti ran to them.

"Company" he replied in his indian accent.

"Not good" Seth replied and looked out the window. Six trucks had pulled up with rebel troops with assault rifles and body armor.

"There's no way we gotta run" Yung said.

"Roger, keep the window, Sep and Dmitri, go to the roof, we'll cross from there to the other buildings, no way we're going down" Seth told them. He ran to the door and looked down the spiraling stairs upwards as the troops came towards them. Dmitri ran to the elevator and pried the doors open as Yung slipped in and saw the elevators coming up. He jumped and landed near the power systems and slapped a slab of C20 against it and blew the connectors. The elevators stopped and sat there.

\*\*[Music: Sascha Dikiciyan "A Force for Order"]\*\*

"One way up gone" Yung reported as he jumped back to Dmitri and they got out and closed the doors. Seth and Roger fired from their range, and made each shot hit right between their eyes. Sepaakti set up multiple trip wires near certain parts upwards as they ran and fired, the rebels returning fire as they ran, the bullets barely hitting behind them.

"Go go go!" Seth yelled as they hauled upwards to the rooftop. Seth reached it first and opened the door, only to come face to face with a rebel trooper. He grabbed his rifle and threw him over the railing quickly, and the second one Dmitri had already moved up behind and slit his throat as he tried to help his brethren. The third came in and Seth snap kicked and grabbed the knife he tried to strike at him with and pulled and twisted, and then brought his elbow to his head and pressed down on his neck hard. He then brought his gun to his head and pulled back toward the door and fired to keep blood from hitting him.

They all looked around and saw the rooftops of multiple buildings nearby.

"We gotta make the jumps!" Dmitri told him and he nodded in agreement. They all went into Parkour mode, locating the easiest path to the other side and then to the other buildings.

\*\*[Music: Amon Tobin "Rabble Rouser"]\*\*

Seth leapt and slid down a plexi slope and jumped as did the others following in his footsteps as he landed on the roof of another building and launched himself over a small wall easily as the others did.

"Chopper!" Yung yelled as they saw a chopper heading towards them. As they ran and rolled and jumped off walls to literally fly across the rooftops, the chopper aimed at them and fired chain guns towards them.

"Dive!" Seth yelled and they ran to the edge of the building and dove towards a gutter drainage pipe and slid down it and towards a window nearby. They each went through two windows, smashing through them as they met couples having sex in bed.

"Sorry!" Seth yelled as they ran to the doors and opened them while the couples were startled from their love making.

"We're in a fucking brothel!" Dmitri growled as they all ran down the hallway. They reached the stairwell and leapt over the railings, still twenty stories up and just short dropped themselves to the next railing below and continued quickly down with each other. Seth landed crouched on the bottom and opened the door to meet startled women and old men looking for a good time.

They all ran to the back door as they went through the small lobby and saw more trucks pull up in front of the building. They charged through the door and leapt over a wall and through a park. They turned the corner and ran into a clothing shop. They ran through the back door of that as well, and reached a bus stop, where they had hidden a small cache of clothes nearby. They each changed into something different from what they were wearing to throw off visual, and then walked to a car. Yung popped the locks and they got inside and drove off with the stolen vehicle as Serina on board the Conundrum hacked the systems to make sure it wouldn't turn off if cops pursued.

"Well now, that was a little out there don't you think?" Dmitri asked everyone.

"They were watching the building more than likely. Sep, keep your head down, we need to make it look like we only have four people versus five in the car" Seth said and Sepaakti shrunk in the seat to give the impression there were only four people from behind and through the windows without careful inspection.

"We need that intel" Seth said and they drove into an alley much further away and ditched the car. They walked towards a car dealership and bought a used vehicle right off the lot quickly with almost no effort as Serina hacked the systems to bring up an exemplary credit record and a fake bank account. They drove the used car straight towards the bank, and stopped two blocks away.

All of them got out as Sepaakti stayed with the car and got some coffee from a caf   while Roger and Yung sat at different positions near the bank. Seth and Dmitri walked in and went towards the teller.

"Ah, can I help you?" she asked in a cheerful tone.

"Yes, can you call your bank manager for me please? I need to talk to him involving my brother's lockbox" Seth said.

"One moment please" she said and called her manager over.

"Yes? Is there a problem?" he asked.

"No problem sir, I just was given the code and instructions to pull out whatever was inside this lockbox account" Seth said and pointed to the number.

"Do you have the key and passcode?" the manager asked. Seth pulled out the key that was in the package and passcode. The manager nodded and walked them to the vault with security following, and then looked for the right number. He found it quickly, and pulled it out, and they both unlocked it.

"I'll wait outside so you can see the contents in peace" he said smiling and walked out. Seth and Dmitri thanked him and opened the lockbox.

"This might be big for that welcome party" Dmitri commented.

"No kidding right? We're-" Seth stopped mid-sentence as they opened the lockbox. It was empty.

"Could they already have gotten to it? Are weâ   Roger, Yung, status?" Dmitri whispered to his bone mic.

"No vehicles heading to the bank, nothing alerted. I don't think they know" Yung said.

"All clear at the car" Sepaakti reported.

"So he didn't have any info?" Dmitri asked. Seth stood there for a moment thinking.

"Not the building" they both said in unison.

"What? What do you guys mean?" Roger asked.

"Not in the building, the coordinates are UNDER" Seth told them.

"Oh fuckâ€|" Yung growled.

"Yup, sewers are going to suck" Roger sighed.

"Alright, let's pack this in and get underfoot" Seth grumbled and they put the lockbox back into the larger box and knocked on the door. The manager came back in and helped put the box back into its slot and lock it in place, and wished them a good day as they left. Dmitri and Seth reached a sewer entrance in an alley as Roger followed to keep an eye out, and they opened it and jumped in.

"God I hate this job sometimesâ€|" Dmitri growled as the smell was rank.

"We do the stuff no one else can bring themselves to do bud. This is a river of shit, but who else do you expect to do the impossible?" Seth asked.

"No one" Dmitri chuckled. They slogged down the sewer pipe and headed in the direction of the bank, and reached a dead end with multiple pipes along the walls. A sealed heavy vault door was on the wall.

"Map says there are six more behind it, and sensors to detect any movement beyond as well as heatâ€| shitâ€|" Seth grumbled as Dmitri turned around and sighed.

"Wait, if this is the bank vault, maybeâ€|" Dmitri said quietly as they searched the walls and pushed on bricks and piping. One pipe opened up after a half hour of searching, and they checked inside to see shit and water pouring through, but a small package was sealed to the inside.

"Greatâ€|" Seth groaned and reached inside to have the fecal matter and water pour over his hand and grabbed the package and ripped it out. They both walked to the entrance and got out, and Roger offered a bottle of water for Seth to wash his hands off. After his hands were cleaned, Sepaakti ran up with a small bag of clothes he had just gained from a nearby clothing shop and let both Dmitri and Seth change in the alleyway. They walked off after putting the clothes in the dumpster and headed to the car. After they got inside and drove to the hotel they were staying at, Seth opened the bag and let the others look at it while Dmitri and he took showers.

Once they were out of the bathrooms and cleaned, Roger and Yung showed them another data crystal.

"Better not be another road tripâ€|" Seth grumbled.

"It isn't" Sepaakti said quietly as they popped it into the portable holo dais. What showed up was not what they wanted to see.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Elena read through reports of cargo ships getting ready to leave port and head upwards as stealth probes fed information. She knew she

wasn't supposed to allow any of her fighters to intercept them, but she did still want to know where they were heading and if any of them became hostile. If they engaged, it was bad, if the enemy engaged, it was fire at will to protect lives.

She walked down the hallway and towards the bridge to meet up with Dare. Veronica was sitting in her office looking through her own reports and looked up.

"Coffee?" Dare asked her. Elena shook her head.

"Just keeping up with the current events right now" she replied and sat down in a chair across from Dare at her desk.

"Can't wait until we head back? I hear 7th fleet still hasn't figured out how the beacon works" Dare told her.

"I know, I read about that. Hopefully Seth can figure it out. They've got quite a bit of data stored with their AIs. From what they said, it could take decades or even a century or multiple centuries to fully understand what was in it there is that much. He said they might have found out how to do it, but I don't know how. Who knows?" Elena explained and sighed.

"Worried about him?" Dare asked.

"Of course. It's not like Buck or John when they're down there, they can at least call for assistance. Seth'sâ€¦ he's running dark right now. I don't know if he's running smoothly or if there are problems that aroseâ€¦" Elena said and trailed off as they received a call.

"Put it through Cherry" Dare said.

"It's not Cherry Captain, but I'll transfer the signal nonetheless" Serina said over their coms. Dare was taken aback by the voice as Elena looked up at the ceiling in worry.

\*\*[Music: Snow Patrol â€" The Lightning Strike (Up to 5min 15secs)]\*\*

"This is Poltergeist with Cypher team calling Conundrum" Seth said over the coms. It sounded like he was moving quickly and a car engine could be heard.

"Seth? What's going on? I thought you said you were running dark?" Elena asked.

\*\*[Luyten]\*\*

"We're not anymore. We're heading towards a star port immediately. Scramble fighters, they've got WMDs" Seth said as Dmitri drove at full speed down the highway, dodging cars as they headed towards the space port. Roger and Yung both pushed spare pistols into holsters and Sepaakti cocked a shotgun.

"WMDs? Are you sure?" Elena asked over the coms.

"Positive. They've got plans to ship them to worlds still in neutrality while the UNSC rebuilds and then send them as underground



mining equipment for the Ark on Earth. Guys, it's bad. Serina, send intel to the boys at home, tell them to not let transports through under any circumstances until fully checked. Tell Metfield also we might have a leak in another intelligence division and someone is feeding them WMDs. I want that tracked. Shiva Nukes here, going to be transported on the \_Corrected Route\_ and the \_Dagger's Envy\_. We can't knock them out of the sky quick enough" Seth told them.

"I can get there fast enough" Elena told him.

"No you can't, they'll jump before you get near. Serina and Dare, we need specialized MAC rounds fired at the ships ASAP as they come up. I know I said don't attack transports, but this is completely different. Serina can work the coordinate correction. We need Rods from God" Seth told them. He was referring to kinetic barrage weaponry, telephone pole sized rods with a rocket engine fired from a MAC system and then dropped through the atmosphere before the ships can break orbit. The rods would reach in excess of Mach 10 coming down, creating a detonation that could bust any armor known and destroy any nukes on board.

"That could set them off though!" Elena commented.

"No it won't, all WMDs have defensive measures to stop that from happening. They need to be set before they can go, and this will stop them from getting the chance" Seth told her. They were nearly at the port.

"We could use some back up after for extraction however, as we just found out they know we're here" Seth told her. Elena and Dare both looked at each other. Elena shot out of the room and towards the hangar to get prepped as Dare kept talking.

"Do you need ground support?" Dare asked.

"Dunno yet, we need to find who is responsible for the transfers over to these ships. We're hoping if we're quick enough we can nab the heads who planned this. Any overzealous killing could stop us from getting valuable intel" Seth told her.

"I'll have the ODSTs on standby just in case" she told him.

"Appreciated" Seth told her and turned the coms off. They reached the port and parked quickly, swerving into place and just leaving the car idle. They jumped the gate near the ships effortlessly and ran to the hangar bays for the transports.

"Which ones?" Dmitri asked. Seth pulled out the data and found one hangar was nearby while another was clear across the port.

"We'll never tag both of them for the shelling in time if we don't split up" Roger said and Seth nodded. Roger, Yung and Sepaakti headed towards the second hangar while Seth and Dmitri handled the first. Team 2 ran through back hallways and clotheslined a guard as he came by and knocked him to the ground, and then continued on. Team 1 entered the first hangar and found out the ship was almost ready to leave.

"Serina, target is tagged" Seth said as he aimed a small laser system

on his pistol towards the ship.

"Rod inbound" Serina responded as they saw a group of men heading towards the doors and away from the ship as it started to pull back on a platform and blast panels come up around it. Seth and Dmitri backed off and through the door again and waited. As the group came through, they ambushed two guards and foot swept another, and stopped another from firing his rifle. Dmitri sliced two throats and cut the trigger finger off of one guard as the two officials tried to run.

Seth charged after them as Dmitri finished with the guards and headed after. Elena launched in her Black Blade Mk II-C and shot towards Luyten as fast as she could. Seth leapt onto one official as the second tried to fire at him over his shoulder, and Seth returned fire and hit him in the knee, the first just under him and struggling. Seth had him in a headlock as the other tried to rotate and fire at him again, but Dmitri had thrown one of his knives through the air and imbedded it through his hand. The man screamed as he dropped the gun after it fired once and ricocheted off a wall.

"Seth! The whole port is alerted!" Serina told him in a worried tone.

"We need to get these guys out of here" Seth replied and picked up the first one and recognized Roger and Yung come back after tagging the second ship.

"Second Rod inbound" Serina reported as Roger and Yung grabbed the second official and pulled them both towards a door. They met some guards who pulled their guns as Sepaakti came up behind and shot them, and they continued on with zip ties around the hands of the men they just captured.

"First ship coming up" one officer on Dare's bridge said as they saw the rod head straight towards it and strike. The rod connected with all of its kinetic force and blew the ship to hell. The second one was coming up and the second rod struck, taking it out as well, however it gave the round a slight chase as it maneuvered with its fins and engine to a new angle. Elena shot straight towards the port, avoiding the two very large blasts from the destroyed ships and saw multiple trucks and choppers reach the port.

Seth led the group out and towards the car as they tried to get in, with guards behind them firing at them. Roger returned fire and shot their weapons out of their hands, and Yung kicked the legs out of one who tried to get close to them. They threw bags over the two official's heads and threw them inside.

"Shit, not a lot of room!" Roger said as he got into the driver's seat with Yung on the other side.

"We'll nab another car and follow!" Seth said as Dmitri ran to another car nearby and shattered the window, and then had Serina hack the systems remotely. The car turned on and Seth and Dmitri got inside and followed Roger, Yung and Sepaakti with the two captives as the trucks tried to follow.

"Drive!" Seth said as he fired out the window and popped a wheel of one truck, and they returned fire. Both cars swerved to dodge, and

two choppers came into view.

"Shit! this is not a good day!" Seth groaned as they jinked left and right to dodge incoming fire. The back window was blown out and the windshield was blown as well. Wind flew into their faces as they pushed the pedal to the metal and headed straight down the highway back the way they came with ten trucks following and at least five choppers.

One truck fired an RPG, and they swerved and dodged as it struck near the wheel and popped it. Dmitri kept the car going, but he was grinding the rim against the ground.

"Fuck fuck fuck!" Seth snapped as he fired two more rounds and expelled his clip for a new one.

"Hard to maneuver now!" Dmitri said as a chopper came towards them and was about to fire, when a missile flew out and struck it. Elena's fighter shot by with a sonic boom and turned for another pass, as a second chopper was already down as well. The last three tried to flip around but she already had a lock.

\_You'll never get near him damn it\_ Elena thought as she narrowed her eyes in anger.

"Oh shit!" Dmitri yelled as he put the brakes on and swerved barely and rolled the car, as it lost control and bounced, and hit an IED. The car had just rotated on its trunk as the blast struck the rear, and both Seth and Dmitri were rocketed into the air temporarily before landing and rolling a bit more. Time almost went still for Elena as she saw what had happened. She fired three more missiles and took out the last three choppers before they could even engage her, and strafed the trucks with her Vulcans.

Seth and Dmitri pushed the door open and they rolled out, disoriented and bruised up with cuts all over. The trucks were still firing at them as they got their bearings as fast as they could, and slid down the side of the highway to a rocky area nearby. The trucks stopped, only four of them left as the rebel troops bailed out and tried to head after them. Elena dropped two 1200lb. bombs right onto the trucks and blew them away. Seth and Dmitri both fired back from their hiding spot as the last rebels continued to fire back.

"I'm running low" Seth told Dmitri.

"So am I" he replied back as the rebels slowly advanced. They were sore and tired as they hugged the rocky outcrop and hoped they wouldn't get a good shot at them. One bullet barely nicked Seth's right leg, but he didn't even notice it as he fired one last round and his clip was empty.

"Out" he reported. Dmitri fired three more.

"Out as well" he replied just as they heard a volley of micro missiles barrage the area above them.

"In" Elena said as she engaged her JTOL and hovered, watching them stand up and Seth smile up at her.

"Nice timing" he chuckled with dirt and grime covering him. She

smiled, though he couldn't see it.

"It's not like I was going to let them have you" she said softly. Seth nodded at her fighter as they all saw the GRID pelican in the distance head in their direction. Roger and the others must have reached it and stored the two officials aboard. Both men slowly came up the side of the highway, grunting from soreness of the blast and being flipped around.

"Do we have ops green?" Seth asked over the coms.

"Ops is green, Ops is green, yellow to green" Yung reported as it headed to them and landed. Seth and Dmitri boarded it quickly and it headed up after turning on all stealth systems.

**\*\*[One hour later]\*\***

The GRID pelican landed and GRID troopers escorted the two men off the craft and towards the medical bay and then to an interrogation room. Seth stepped off the transport with help from Dmitri as his whole body screamed to sit down. Elena had landed as well, and ran to his hangar. As she reached it, she took her helmet off as she saw him being helped to a crate to sit. She ran to him and lunged in an embrace.

"Ooph, oh, ow ow ow" he groaned as she let go and looked at him as he sat down.

"Are you ok?" she asked as she looked at his chest and then the cuts and bruises.

"I'm alive, that's usually a good thing. I don't think anything is broken, but I'm kind of beat up" he replied and she sat next to him. A medical team came up and checked him over, and applied first aid.

"We should get him to the medical bay" one of them said.

"Not happening. Apply basic and get me up. I need to find out what those bastards know" he said.

"Seth, don't you dare. You need to settle down and rest or-" Elena started.

"The ops is done but the second phase isn't Elena. We do this our way. I'm not injured, just beat up. I can handle this" he said and stood up. She tried to stop him but he waved her back.

"God you are stubborn when it comes to help" she growled.

"I learn from the best" he chuckled. She smirked and rolled her eyes. He walked with Dmitri to the door as Elena followed worried and they went to the interrogation room. Elena was instructed it was a GRID interrogation and that she couldn't join. She felt a bit annoyed at being left out, but Seth told her it wouldn't be long with the evidence they had.

**\*\*[Four hours later]\*\***

Seth walked out of the room still sore and stiff and went to their

quarters. Elena caught him just entering and helped him inside.

"So, what did you find out?" Elena asked softly as she helped him strip. He groaned and grunted as he pulled clothes off with her aid and went to the shower.

"I can't exactly tell you all of it, but we just stopped a major strike. Some of those nukes were going to be to cull other planets into working with them behind the scenes and assist in the rebellion. The two men we got the intel from were apparently Lieutenants to a much bigger group. I'm not a hundred percent sure, but we might have just crippled them, at least temporarily with attacking other UNSC worlds" he told her.

"That's great to hear" she told him as he entered the shower and washed the dirt and grime from his body. The hot water felt good to loosen his muscles, and as the water turned off he dried himself and put some new clothes on slowly. Elena sat him down on the bed as he was exhausted.

"Thanks for the backup" he chuckled as he lied down.

"You're welcome" she smiled and kissed him, but bumped his elbow.

"Ow" he replied.

"How much ow is on your body?" she asked as she cocked an eyebrow.

"My tongue isn'tâ€¦ no wait, I think I still bit thatâ€¦ umâ€¦ I'll let you know after I take a nap" he told her.

"That bad huh?" she asked as she looked at the door and then at him.

"I'm not going to the medical bay hon. I'm fine" he told her.

"You are not fine, but it's not like I can get you to think otherwise. You promised me damn it. You promised you would come back without a scratch, and here you are" she said and motioned to his body.

"Look, I'll take a nagging after I get some sleep ok? You can yell at me all you want after I wake up, I will listen and nod my head the whole way, justâ€¦ please?" he asked. She sighed and held his hand.

"Fine, alright. I really was worried about you, you know" she said softly.

"I know, and this didn't exactly go the way we wanted it, but ehâ€¦ what happens happens. Now please?" he practically begged. She nodded and let him fall asleep as she got up and slipped out of their quarters and back to the hangar for a report on her fighter and the statistics on the kills and any observers of the attack. Her own debriefing was smooth as she was the one who went through the report for herself.

"How's your boy doing?" Ezekiel asked.

"He's asleep in our room. Hope he feels better after that. He got hit by an IED for fuck's sakeâ€¦ he should be dead from that, but they hit it at just the right angle for there to be no penetration to the front of the car as it punched through the trunk. That's luck" she told him.

"Or skill. You don't exactly know if they planned the flip after seeing the explosive in front of them right?" Ezekiel asked her.

"Yeah, true, they could be prepared for the chances of that happeningâ€¦ still, my heart nearly stopped when I saw it" she replied.

"I know lass. Well, no return fire, no damage, quick response and no calibrations needed. You're good to go" Ezekiel told her. She thanked him and walked back out of the hangar and towards the officer's DFAC to get some food for Seth when he woke up. He was back, and he was alive, though battered. She hoped he didn't go out physically for any other missions while he was with her on the voyage. She couldn't stand the idea of him dying. She prayed that if they could both just survive through all of this, that she'd definitely settle down with him and balance her life as a General and as his wife, and he'd have to balance his as a remote viewer and as her husband. Hopefully their future kids would understand, and hopefully they'd never have to tell them what they did, or have others do it for them.

## 20. Flanking Maneuver

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**[0900 hours, July 17th 2554 (Military Calendar)/ _Infinity _class  
carrier _Conundrum_]**
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Seth groaned as Elena lay next to him reading data on a pad on her lap. She glanced over to him as his head was shoved under a pillow and he had been dead to the world for the past day.

"Someone doesn't want to wake up" she chuckled and reached over to rub his shoulder. He pulled his head out slowly from his protective barrier and looked around bleary eyed with sleep inducing confusion, his brain not fully on yet. He looked up at her and gave her a small grin and winced. She frowned at the face he made, worry etched into her blue eyes.

"And you said you were fine" she grumbled, her eyes sweeping over the cuts and bruises he had received from his trip to the surface.

"I am fine, just sore. Ever been hit by an IED?... right, wrong question" he chuckled.

"I hope I never do, or you again for that matter. You aren't going to have that happen again, ever" she told him softly, staring at him with worry.

"I've been through six hon, and that was a minor one, trust me" he told her and scratched his chest before sitting up. Elena shot towards him quickly and held his chin cupped in one of her hands gently. He was going to pull away, but he could see the look she gave him and stopped.

"How many did you say you've been hit with?" she asked him with a look of utter terror in her eyes.

"Six, five before you knew I was alive again, two right after training, and one of them was a fuck up on my part; I didn't expect the grenade to trigger the vibration sensors so far away" he explained in a bored manner. She was almost in shock.

"This is life for me Elena, all part of the job, same as you going out there and taking on superior aliens with your fighter. Risk happens in our line of work" he told her.

"I go out there with backup and don't go running into explosives Seth! You have a death wish? Don't scare me like that!" she snapped at him, however her eyes betrayed her frustration with pain and love for him.

"I don't go running towards things that go boom, quite the opposite hon. If we know about it, we stay away from it until someone can stop it, or use it for our own gains. We didn't know it was there when we headed in, so therefore they put it there after. What's happened has happened; can't change that now" he told her. She took a deep breath and rubbed his chin gently before letting go, and he got up and ate the cold food she had sitting on the desk for him.

"I hope you were able to keep busy while I was gone" he told her with a small chuckle in between bites. She rolled her eyes and put her pad down, and then rubbed the bridge of her nose with her eyes squeezed shut.

"Two wings are going down along with half the fleet to engage any combat forces in the area. Martial Law has been placed, but that obviously won't matter to the rebel population. Now that we have to worry about WMDs, there are checks happening on every transport heading out, and a blockade has been produced with 3rd fleet coming to provide a picket" Elena explained as he munched on a fruit bar. She watched intently as he finished it and looked at her.

"We also intercepted transmissions stating they knew you were down there, but figured you were ONI officers" she explained. Seth chuckled.

"Just goes to show no one knows about our agency" he laughed and drank down a juice box. Elena still stared at him. He looked up at her with the straw in his mouth, still seeing the look she was giving him.

"Hey, stop worrying about me; I don't expect you to sit all warm and comfy in some fortified installation, regardless of your rank. You know you should be grounded because of being a General you know, it's a managerial job these days" he said with a small smirk and a wink.

"And that stops me how? Aren't you a General as well?" she smirked with her nose in the air. He glared at her for a second.

"Only because of that fucking clause in my contract! And only when there aren't any other order barkers in the sector! That means you being a casualty!" he scoffed at her. They were both silent for a

minute, the tension in the air suddenly rising.

"Sorry, saw some things down there that I can't share, gets to you no matter what or how much training you have—we lost an agent—" he told her and looked down at the floor, not knowing what else to say. Losing forces was never easy, especially ones that shouldn't have been lost.

"I'm sorry" she told him softly, not meeting his eyes.

"Yeah" he replied simply and got up and then stretched in different directions, allowing his stiff muscles to be pulled out of their constricted and painful states and relax.

"Besides, agents don't have ranks unless someone is interfering with our orders" he told her gruffly and bent over.

"And if they do?" she asked.

"You know hon. You can count how many people you know without even a hand who have crossed the agency and stuck around. We're notorious for giving our opposites in thought processing a new place to work their trade" he told her and pointed down in emphasis. She got the hint quickly.

"Built in heating?" she asked.

"The AC is on the fritz most of the time, and not from our efforts" he replied with a smirk. She rolled her eyes and smirked back, and picked her data pad up again.

"So we're going to start doing systematic bombardment to critical anti-air tomorrow" Elena told him nonchalantly while reading through her pad. Seth looked up at her.

"Reclamation? Yeah, I figured that. Not the right time to be trying to break off on their own" he responded.

"You don't have any other business down there do you?" she asked him quietly still looking at her pad.

"Depends on what the other RVs find out, or any other intel; So far, nothing of notice here besides the main rebellion. Things can change" he replied as he took his clothes off and went into the bathroom for a shower. She breathed deep, the answer not giving her much relief.

"Hey, how's Dmitri?" Seth yelled from the shower as the hot water soothed his muscles, though the soap stung some of the still open cuts.

"He's alright, same as you. He actually went to the medical ward for treatment, something you should consider" she yelled back to him as she swapped through some files on ordinance for the Sabres.

"I really am fine" he said as he turned off the shower and wrapped his towel around his waist, and then started to brush his teeth. Elena closed her eyes and shook her head slightly as she released a soundless sigh. This was karma for what she did to Andy, disappearing and thought to be dead while he mourned. Now she had to put up with a



fiancÃ© that could for all intents die in the next year in his line of work. Andy had a risky job as a firefighter, but things weren't actively trying to end his life.

Seth gargled some mouth wash after and walked back into the room to get dressed, and she put the pad down and watched him with tired eyes.

"Have you slept?" he asked. She shook her head.

"Too much going on, I don't get it easy like the rest of the crew" she responded and blew some of her black hair out of her eyes that had fallen over her face. A few grey strands of hair were mixed into them, warning of the stress she was going through as a General, a pilot, and his lover.

"Hey, get some sleep" he told her quietly and slid next to her on the bed. She had wrapped her arms around her knees and just leaned her chin on top.

"Can't, not until I go through these reports first" she told him.

"Can I help? Coffee? Anything? I can read through some of them as well" he told her. She looked at him quizzically with one eyebrow arched.

"What? I can, and I can ask Serina to assist as well. Come on, hand me one, we can get it done easy, you aren't the only one who does reports remember?" he told her and rubbed her shoulder gently. She nodded and handed him a pad as they got to work.

\*\* [1400 hours, July 20th 2554 (Military Calendar)/ \_Infinity\_ class carrier \_Conundrum\_]\*\*

While Elena was controlling her wings and assisting with air superiority, Seth was providing much needed intel on the whole planet in all regards to the marines, ONI intelligence agents and GRID operatives. Most of the ODSF squads were incredibly happy for the dead on information the GRID ops provided, and acclamation to the environment of the planet and its rebel government was quick and efficient.

Seth had disappeared for the majority of the days while doing his duties, and Elena realized just how difficult he was to track if he didn't want to be. Every time she went looking for him, he wouldn't be in the place she thought he would be, and seemed to simply pop up if she requested his location from Cortana or the other AIs. Each moment she did seek him out, it was usually to eat with him or explain something the UNSC was performing, so that he could provide any advice from GRID's perspective. ONI hated the fact they were asking for intel from an agency that they believed was a hedge branch, but was in fact far larger and much better equipped for internal security than the militaristic cell of the Navy. GRID had a fleet of its own ships, fighters as well as other technology, but it prided itself on its capability to fix situations from the shadows with very little collateral damage, and most of that they swept under the proverbial rug easily.

The battle for Luyten would take weeks to handle from what Seth had

estimated, though 5th fleet would not be staying for its entirety and would be relieved by 9th fleet and 12th, with 3rd fleet providing a picket for transports. 5th fleet would then travel to Salvation Colony and attempt to control the signal device. Once they had control, Seth would attempt to use any information gathered to find the Precursor that could access the shipyard and wrest control of it from the alien. Once he had done that, the next step was simply figuring out how to get the shipyard to produce for them. A golden age was on the horizon; that much they knew.

Elena had just finished her late lunch when the intercom started up.

"General Gripen to the bridge immediately. Agent Franklin to the bridge immediately" Cherry said loudly.

"Cherry, what's the problem?" she asked as she put her napkin down.

"You need to hear this from the big cheese ma'am. I knows for sure this ain't somethin you needs to be hearin from me" Cherry told her. Elena sighed and got up, her plate left for a serviceman to come and take it away to the kitchen. She was eating for once in the Flag Officer's Hall, and there was a noticeable change in food quality. She still didn't like that she was the only one there while the DFAC was full with the marines, but sometimes she felt she needed some peace and quiet to eat without anything bothering her.

She walked out of the hall and to the lift that took her straight to the deck with the bridge. As she walked onto the floor, she could see the hectic movement of all officers. Something had gone wrong.

"You need to see this. We're heading to Salvation Colony right now" Dare told her as she suddenly appeared. Elena looked down at a data pad provided for her. A small video was playing in the corner showing 7th fleet being demolished by a Precursor fleet. It was barely hanging on, and requesting immediate assistance. The Precursors had landed ground forces as well. They aimed to take control of the planet.

"We've already gained the orders ma'am, I just wanted to inform you" Dare told her. Elena nodded.

"How long before we leave?" she asked the Captain.

"As soon as the last pelican comes up and 3rd fleet is coming. Four hours, tops. This was a flash priority order ma'am" Dare told her. Elena knew she wasn't the top brass in the fleet, but she was damn close. There was only a Major General and Admiral just above her right now, as Admiral Hood had stayed at Earth. Major General Corrington and Admiral Merins. Both were quite qualified for the job, though neither had much experience with the Precursors like Elena did.

"Flash Priority? We're supposed to wait for 3rd fleet? 7th fleet could be destroyed by the time we get there if we wait" Elena told her.

"Which is why we're simply waiting on the pelicans. 9th fleet and 12th will be here in four days with 3rd in twelve hours, but we'll be

long gone. We're the closest to assist" Dare told her. Elena's heart skipped a beat. 5th fleet at the moment was barely up to snuff right now for large scale space combat, none of the fleets were; they were all relying on each other to come to their aid if any force was large enough to handle one fleet, which was incredibly rare with each race having difficulty maintaining their ships aside from humanity. 5th fleet would hopefully turn the tide before 7th fleet was wiped out, or they'd be next.

Seth walked in quickly looking around as both women looked at him. Dare walked to him and was going to explain what was happening.

"Before you start, I know. Estimates were twenty ships and two hundred fighters. Who else is coming?" Seth asked looking between them. Dare stopped and looked at Elena.

"We're the only ones close enough right now. It'll take us a day to reach them. We're blowing our slip space drive" Dare told him. Both of them realized it would have taken them two weeks to reach the colony without damaging their drive. It was a one way trip until a supply fleet could reach them and repair the systems. All three of them were silent for a minute.

"I'll check with any side ops nearby and see if I can't get some other agency ships to join up with us along the way" Seth told them and the women both nodded as he left.

"This is going to be one hell of a fight" Dare told Elena.

"Yeah. I guess it is" Elena said quietly. The young General walked off the bridge and to her quarters, and pulled up her wings on her terminal. She started pouring through her data pads on her small desk and kept knocking some of them off onto the carpeted ground. She sighed and picked them up and realized she didn't have much space at the moment to sort through multiple lists so quickly, and started throwing spare pads on the bed. She then realized she had to go between her desk and the bed continuously over and over to work out tactics.

Elena finally picked up her pads and walked out of her quarters towards her office, the one she never used. As she reached the door and opened it, she realized this would be the first time she would ever actually use it beyond storage of a few small items in the drawers. She walked in slowly and put the pads down on the desk, and the terminal activated on her approach. As she slid into the large chair, the intercom turned on again.

"Attention all UNSC forces of 5th fleet, this is Admiral Merins. We have just received request for immediate assistance against a hostile force at Salvation Colony by 7th fleet. We are heading there as soon as everyone is back on board. I won't lie to you, the upcoming fight does not look good. The enemy is more advanced, and had the element of surprise against 7th fleet. However, as long as we all work together, stay strong and fight at our best to rescue the beleaguered forces of 7th, we will prevail. Admiral Merins out."

Elena let out a deep breath as she continued the work she started in her quarters. Ezekiel pushed his maintenance crew hard to get the pelicans loaded as the marines came on board and stocked their

weapons in the armory and unloaded their gear.

**\*\*[Four hours later]\*\***

The fleet was prepped and ready to leave. All marines were back in their quarters, ready for slip space transition. The change was quick as the drives spun up, and the whole fleet headed towards Salvation Colony in one massive fireworks display of slip gates opening, a mixture of green, blue and purple lightning arcing through the portals. Seth had managed to get in touch with four other ships belonging to GRID, two frigates and two destroyers. Elena had hoped he would get some more battleships similar to Heavy 2-2, but unfortunately the few they had under their command were stationed at Earth. There were only two battleships in 5th fleet at the moment, one of them being GRID controlled, though it did relieve her it was Heavy 2-2's sister ship, Heavy 3-2. Of 5th fleet numbers, there were only four corvettes, three frigates, two cruisers and one battleship that were GRID operated.

The entire trip was somber, with very little happening on board beyond preparing for a fight that many would not be coming home from. Most of the marines didn't speak much, as each checked their weapons and ammunition, their equipment or got what sleep they could. They ate with little conversation, and the Spartans were silent commandoes in the background, staying apart from anyone else while they cleaned their armor or took power naps.

Elena worked tirelessly on tactics that would give them an edge against the large amount of fighters, as Seth worked with GRID operatives for any combat that might come their way. Serina kept tabs on the signal beacon along with the state of 7th fleet. Twice the enemy AIs tried to trace her back, but she simply struck back with shredding protocols, and dissected every AI that was uploaded to the beacon. She was by far the single most reason the Precursors would not take control of the beacon before they got there.

**\*\*[Six hours later]\*\***

Seth walked in a half daze into their quarters. Elena was sitting at her small desk checking any last emails before they would both get what rest they could. They had just gained news from Serina. 7th fleet had just been wiped out almost completely, the remainder of the fleet scattered or in full retreat, with thousands of ground forces still planetside. The remainder of the forces on the ground were in mass confusion, though a small Sangheili fleet had come to their aide two hours ago. It too was destroyed, but they had at least slowed the advance of the Precursor fleet. Of the previous twenty ships, only sixteen were still operational, and the two hundred fighters were dulled down to one hundred and ninety. Though it was such a small drop, it made their chances of survival that much higher.

Neither of them talked to each other. Their thoughts were on the battle ahead. He laid down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling while Elena sat staring at her screen saver.

"I got in touch with one other ship. Medical. No use in the fight ahead, though I requested for them to come after" he told her quietly.

"I just got notice from Dare, all forces are ready for the assault"

she replied. They didn't say anything for a long time after.

"Sethâ€|" she said suddenly almost whispering out.

"Don't" he snapped.

"Why not?" she snapped back.

"Because we already know alright! Saying it isn't going to change anything. We're coming home after this, both of us" he told her.

"But-" she tried.

"I don't make those shitty promises Elena. We're on the same ship, if I die that means you are most likely a goner as well" he started.

"I'm heading out with Raven Squadron" she told him suddenly. He looked at her.

"You can't be serious" he said matter of factly.

"I'm very serious. They need every edge out there they can, and I'm no good at sitting in the ship giving orders while my pilots are out there fighting for their lives. I'm going, and there's nothing you can say or do to stop me" she told him.

"Elena, that's how many fighters? We have what, one hundred at max? That's including the Vultures hon" he told her softly.

"Which is why I'm needed out there Seth! I don't like to toot my own horn, but I can easily drop a good twenty of those as long as I have a clear shot and time to rearm after! I've done it before!" she growled. He put his hands up defensively.

"Easy, hey, I justâ€|" he trailed off.

"I knowâ€| I knowâ€| but I have to do thisâ€|" she told him. She got up and walked to the bed and flopped down next to him as he curled his arm under her and around her shoulders. He kissed her on her forehead and rubbed her shoulder gently.

"You can't hold it against me for being worried" he told her as Elena leaned against his chest.

"I've got an entire wing of fresh out of the academy pilots, the fleet isn't up to par for a job like this, and I just got a fighter back. If anyone is worried, it's me" she told him. They both got ready for bed, and did their best to relax. They slowly became intimate as they unwound, as they might never have another chance in the future. Buck and Veronica did the same for that night, as did Renee and John.

Dutch wrote to his wife, and Mickey read through a technical manual for multiple explosives. The Rookie slept, and Romeo just lounged in the entertainment room on the couch watching a movie. Jones checked and rechecked his Sabre fighter as did the other pilots. Sarah and Aldric snuck away from the others to be alone together one more time

before they all headed out. Linda meditated in the gym, and Kelly and Fred spared. Tom and Lucy talked for a bit in the DFAC.

Guards were posted at all main doors, with the HAMMER drones and ARGUS drones moving from one position to another. All gates were locked down, and most barricades were now set up. Bulkhead doors were prepped for emergency drop, and all armories had emergency ammunition unlocked. The fleet was as ready as it could be, with Eagle squadron making the same preparations as Raven. Aurora had transmitted their own tactics to Elena for coordination. It was do or die now.

(Author's Note: Yeah, I know, extremely short chapter. I haven't had much time to type for the past month, and even now this is one of those writer's block spots where I couldn't figure out how to continue the story to the next big thing I wanted. There are always chapters that a writer doesn't truly have a firm grasp of, but needs in order to progress the story. I played with a few other ideas but scrapped each one, as all of them seemed too corny (more so than this, sorry.) The rest of the chapters are built already in my head, I simply needed that bottle neck chapter to finish)

## 21. Retaking Salvation

\*\*[01800 hours, July 21\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

The fleet gated out to find a graveyard of torn apart ships, floating bodies and Sangheili hulks listing in the void. Some were still venting atmosphere, sparks popping from wiring, though all were definitely not combat worthy.

"Ma'am" Dare's sensor officer said quietly as she walked over to his station and saw the wide arc of the enemy fleet near the planet. She could see the blips as they moved, turning around to engage the new threat that 5th fleet had now become.

"All crew to battle stations, I repeat, all crew to battle stations, this is not a drill" Cortana's voice sounded off over the intercom. Marines scrambled to their positions for any boarding attempts, with others boarding pelicans for launch towards the planet. The whole fight was going to be both in space, in the air, and on the ground at the same time, there would be no waiting for any space superiority. They couldn't let the enemy gain control of the beacon.

Elena suited up quickly in the changing room with the rest of her squadron as Sarah handed her her helmet. She thanked the blonde Captain and walked briskly to her fighter. Ezekiel had each Black Blade fully equipped for combating Precursor fighters, with everything they knew that could hurt them. As Elena stepped up the side and into the cockpit, Ezekiel came up to it and leaned in.

"We have supply rearmament caches ready to jettison when ready, just give the word lass. Captain Dare has all hangars set as ordinance points, so doesn't matter which one you use if you're close. The rest of the fleet is following suit, and it doesn't matter which ship the pilot is from, they get rearmed" he told her. She nodded and polarized her helmet.

"See you when I get back" she told him quietly as he nodded and stepped down as the cockpit closed and the platform slowly moved, the stairs removed from the side and all fighters were loaded into their mag rails. Elena's heart was almost in her throat. She had never been afraid of any combat situation, however this time they were practically on a suicide mission.

"Shuttle plates locked, blast panel up. Flaps and stabs good. Raven 1-1 clear" Elena said over the coms to the CIC.

"Copy that, engines prime, rail in 3, 2, 1" CIC replied, and she felt the fighter launch her out of the ship along with the rest of the fighters.

"All fighters clean launch, engines green, we're clear" Elena told them as she already had a target list in the distance coming for them.

"Pelicans are ready, just need a hole" Farrah said over coms.

"Echo 2-1-2 out and about" Jack said.

"\_RVs on point, doing what we can" Seth told them.\_

Everyone in Raven squadron now knew that they couldn't rely on Seth and the other Remote Viewers to protect them, and needed to rely on their own skills and training to survive. Three Precursor fighter icons suddenly disappeared in the distance. Seth and the others were already hard at work as they set off ordinance, overloaded systems and generally threw monkey wrenches into their equipment. They were invisible gremlins from hell, and she was grateful for them being there.

"Light 1-2 coming in for blitz run" Elena heard over the coms as a GRID corvette moved with the fighters, designed specifically for fast multiple strikes against enemy small craft. A hail of missiles, auto cannon fire, and point defense lasers erupted from the corvette straight at the distant targets, building a wall of ordinance to slow or destroy some advancing fighters. In the far distance, they could see the hulks of the enemy ships. Eight cruisers, seven destroyers, and one other, much larger than the cruisers. They all somehow knew it was a battleship.

\*\*[Music: Two Steps From Hell "Freedom Fighters]\*\*

The Precursor fighters broke formation and sprayed beam fire towards them, as each UNSC squadron broke their own formation and headed after their targets.

"Engage, engage, engage!" Elena ordered as the fighters traded ordinance and beam fire. Elena shot after two quickly, firing a salvo of micro missiles and two penetrators as she instinctively already aimed at the other with her particle cannons. It felt so much better to be in a fighter than a pelican now for her. Two Sabres exploded nearby, but the UNSC gained revenge quickly with another four being destroyed by Sarah and Aldric working in tandem, with Sarah's fighter firing in almost all directions with her turrets on the rear. Aurora and her squadron were frontloading their damage as fast as they could, using their increased shields and armor to protect the more fragile Sabres now.

The dog fight was one massive fur ball, with targets moving by each other constantly and stray cannon fire striking shields of friendlies in some situations. Both Light 1-2 and another corvette had to retreat after massive damage to their hull, though each took down a good twenty fighters. The rest of the fleet moved forward as the Precursor ships headed towards them.

Four fighters merged together and shot towards Elena, with one opening up immediately. She knew it would hit, and struck her shields before she could even react. The shields flared bright as they lowered by fifty percent, as she rolled to make her a thinner target and flipped behind another fighter. There was no cover in space, and so they had to use what they saw to keep from being taken out, even if it meant trading one hostile firing at her for another that didn't actually have a good lock on her.

Two torpedoes flew by, striking a nearby Sabre and blowing it apart.

"I'm hit! I'm hit!" Jacobs yelled as she saw in the distance two fighters closing on him. His shields were down and there was a small amount of damage to his wing, but he was still fighting and running.

Suddenly, a nearby Sabre flew right in front of Jacob's fighter when another volley of beams struck out from the enemy craft, and tore off part of its left wing, dropping its shield quickly.

"Fucking hell! No!" Jacobs gawked in horror as it was one of the new pilots.

"Losing control! It was fucking worth it!" the pilot yelled out as he blew his cockpit and abandoned the damaged fighter. The Precursors tried to finish him off, but two other Sabres and one of Eagle squadron intercepted.

"Son of a bitch, the nuggets are willing to lose everything to win! I gotta show some respect to that!" Merricks said as Falken came over his right shoulder and sprayed her Vulcans at a fighter he had just dropped the shields of.

"We need to make sure that doesn't happen Captain, now move your ass" Falken said sternly but without annoyance, her order acknowledged as they both shot after Precursor fighters trying to flank the new wing.

Out in the distance, a volley of beams shot out from the capital ships the Precursors used, and struck against multiple UNSC forces in space. Six fighters were cleaved in half by the weapons, and multiple UNSC ships warned of damage.

"Shields are a goner, trying to bring them back up!" Dare's officers told her as the ship was rocked by enemy fire.

"Breach on deck fourteen! Sealing the area!" another officer told her.

"Christ, they're cutting us apart!" Dare growled behind gritted teeth.



"Half the wings are already gone ma'am!" Dariah told her from her station.

"But we've done our damage too. The Precursor craft have been dropped to ninety. That's one hundred kills" Aldric said over the coms.

"That means nothing if they finish us off. We can't retreat. We have to move forward" Dare growled. The carriers were not supposed to directly engage the enemy, but at the position they were at in the void, they were easy pickings without trying to keep something between them.

"All pelicans are heading down fast, make a break for it boys!" Jack yelled over the coms as a hail of pelican transports shot towards the planet. Some were blown apart by anti-air from below, others were struck by enemy fighters trying to intercept them. Two of the Precursor cruisers suddenly exploded.

"\_Oh, so that's what that button does" Aaron suddenly said.\_

"\_Yeah, told you" Seth said as he moved to another ship to activate its self-destruct.\_

"\_Can I get some help out here? You guys are having fun blowing ships up while I'm out here stopping fighters from being manhandled" Thelma growled.\_

"\_Less return fire means we ARE helping" Seth told her.\_

"\_The fighters need to be thinned!" Thelma yelled at him.\_

"\_I know! Shit! The explosions are taking out some of them along the way! Two birds with one stone! We thought this through ok?" Seth snapped at her. The RVs were getting grouchy with the quick maneuvers they had to pull to save lives.\_

"Seth, are you going to-" Dr. Montez started to say.

"\_I dunno yet ok? If I do that, and another fleet pops in that's larger, we're fucked. I can't fragment just yet, gimme a chance to assess" Seth told him over the coms.\_

"Seth, I'm going to work on damaging their communications with their fighters, hang on" Serina told him as she sent out multiple access pings to the Precursor fighters. Cortana and Tachi were in the background holding the door open while Serina stopped them mid movement or activated thrusters to slam them into each other. She couldn't stop them completely because the control signals were hardwired to repeat faster than she could stop the orders, but she could send spare signals to change direction suddenly, temporarily drop shields, lose lock ons etc.

Precursor craft shot by the \_Conundrum \_as Cherry opened up with the auto turrets mounted along the hull of the ship. Laser fire and Archer missiles were striking against both fighters and ships alike, not caring who they hit.

"This is insane! We just lost four frigates!" one officer said to

Dare.

"We can't do this without help!" Dare grumbled. Elena's squadron was having a hard time controlling the enemy fighters with over half their own destroyed.

"We can't keep doing this!" Elena heard Sarah whisper quietly, and she knew she was losing her nerve.

"\_God damn it! alright! Alright I'm fucking popping now!" Seth growled.\_

"Prep for a pacemaker change" Dr. Montez told Jenny and she nodded as Seth fragmented his mind and condensed the energy around his pod.

"\_\*\*Clear near the enemy fleet all fighters! Damage coming in!"  
\*\*\_\_Seth barked with an echoing voice.\_

"Whoa! that's new!" Elena whispered to herself. Seth had only done it twice in the past, once being the test. She had never heard the change in his voice when he fragmented his mind.

Suddenly, what looked like portals appeared outside of the enemy ships, and what came out was nothing short of incredible. Blasts of energy shot out in a shotgun pattern next to the ships, blasting through their shields and damaging the armor severely. It looked like god himself was firing a hail of energy and wrath towards the enemy.

"Fuck yes!" Jacobs cheered as everyone watched the ensuing ethereal carnage.

"Energy still peaked Seth, you're still good" Dr. Montez told him.

Seth produced a very small nova explosion in the middle of the enemy fleet along with Aaron and Thelma both shielding the UNSC forces.

"All eight cruisers down! Five destroyers gone! Just the battleship and two destroyers! All fighters are bugging out!" the sensors officer said as Dariah swapped through wing channels.

"All fighters returning, I can't believe this is happening!" she reported in surprise. Seth was scrapping the ships quickly, and they had no idea where the attacks were coming from. The battleship retreated through a portal as did the last two destroyers. The enemy had been defeated, but at a heavy cost.

"Damage report" Dare ordered and a list showed up on a glitching screen. Six decks had been breached, with no boarding parties. The drives were damaged, but they had made it out easy compared to the rest of the fleet. Over half the fleet's fighters were gone, along with eight frigates, four cruisers and Admiral Merin's carrier.

"God damn it!" Dare growled as she slammed her fist into a station wall, as Dariah watched her being angry. They had lost the Admiral. The ship was listing with escape pods already launched before, what

few got out. The carrier had been carved into pieces, with the bridge targeted it seemed at the beginning. The enemy had analyzed their ships just as much as the UNSC had done to them. They were learning.

"Maybe she made it off" Dariah told her.

"Noâ€¦ she didn'tâ€¦" Dare growled and looked at the list of vitals for critical officers throughout the fleet. Admiral Merins had unknown to the rest of the crew been sucked into the vacuum of space as the carrier had been gutted. The list was small, and only privy to the commanding officers of the UNSC ships in the event the chain of command was damaged.

"Then that leavesâ€¦ General Corrington and General Gripenâ€¦" Dariah whispered in shock.

"Get those fighters planet side, those pelicans need air support" Dare told her. She acknowledged as the battle was far from over with the enemy fleet no longer functioning.

"Seth, you still have ample energy, are you going down?" Dr. Montez asked.

"\_\*\*Yes. Going to do what I can to stop any Precursor entrenchment\*\*\_\_ Seth told him.\_

"\_Seth, we gotta head back, Thelma isn't feeling so good so she's low on energy, and I'm kind of dropping too" Aaron told him.\_

"\_\*\*No worries, get some rest, and thanks\*\*\_\_ he replied back.\_

"They've connected multiple times Seth, we don't have much time" Serina told him as she fended off multiple access attempts from Precursor AIs at the signal beacon. They were frustrating her severely as each time she took apart one AI, it would turn out to be a copy, similar to Cortana's cloning program.

"\_\*\*If I fuck up down there, I could bring the whole tunnel system down on the rines Serina. I have to be careful\*\*\_\_ Seth told her.\_

"I know that, but if you're going to do something, do it now, preferably working from the back forward" she told him. He sighed and acknowledged, and got to work while the ground forces poured out of their pelicans and worked their way to retake the tunnels.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Firepower was heavy from the tunnels as the marines and ODSTs took cover, rail fire flying with spurts of plasma. Scattered 7th fleet forces came to regroup quickly as did elites lost on the ground, but it was extremely difficult to fight.

John charged and rolled behind a rock as the nearby ground exploded in charred bits of rubble and glass. His shields had taken exactly one hit before failing from their attacks, and he knew immediately that even Spartans would have great difficulty against these

monstrous Precursor soldiers. Humans were so small compared to the ancient enemy, but their weapons could hurt them, albeit slowly and once they had whittled down their personal defenses.

"These bastards keep taking out our vehicles, they don't have enough maneuverability or defense to keep away from those hits!" Ash said over the coms as he sprayed his entire clip towards a Precursor soldier. The shields flared repeatedly before it turned and fired at him, and he ducked behind his cover that was being torn apart. He would have to move very soon.

"We can't use rockets or grenades in there because it could collapse the tunnels" Fred told them as a sniper round flew over his shoulder from Linda and struck a Precursor dead on in the forehead. The shields flared and its head snapped back a tiny bit, before it returned fire.

Mickey rushed a warthog straight by with Dutch on the gun firing wildly with the gauss cannon. It was the only thing that was doing enough damage to the enemy defenses and not causing damage to the nearby tunnel, though once they entered it would be moot with the thunderous CRACKs the weapon would produce. The sound the gauss cannon made didn't really shake the tunnel, but the amplified sound would literally make any marines permanently deaf. Even the Precursor soldiers were swapping weapons to more energy based instead of their rail guns.

"AAAAHHHHHHH!" Buck yelled as he fired his assault rifle at a Precursor who had charged his hiding spot, and actually got it to back off as he had blinded it with continuous bullet strikes at its eyes. He shot by quick with a pack of C20, slapped it to the side of the Precursor, and ran as fast as he could while hitting the trigger. The shields flared for a second before the ancient alien exploded, and the remainder collapsed.

"Ah yeah! Yes! That's how you- oh shit!" Buck cheered before ducking behind more cover near Kelly. She was firing her shotgun over and over, constantly reloading due to the magazine tube. The entire force was moving excruciatingly slowly, and advancing mere inches through the tunnel every few minutes.

"Cortana, have they accessed the systems yet?" John asked.

"Not yet, Serina is keeping them at bay, but they may figure out how to oh no! They've sealed out inbound communication for the beacon! She can't hold them off any longer!" Cortana told him with urgency in her voice.

"We can barely make it through the first tunnel! There are how many miles below the surface we need to head through?" Tom commented.

"\*\*All Precursors are gone from the installation room" \*\*\_\_Seth warned them.\_\_

"Thank god. What about the beacon?" Buck asked.

"\*\*Can't figure it out, need an AI to reconnect. We'll worry about that once we have these guys out of here" \*\*\_\_Seth told him.\_\_

"Any help would be appreciated, or this whole fight is gonna take days" Kelly responded.

"\_\*\*Doing what I can\*\*\_" Seth told them.\_

Out of nowhere, everyone's HUD lit up with target markers from the tunnels, shield frequencies, weapon listings, all barricades. Seth had marked all of the enemy forces, and began firing smaller bursts of energy nearby along with placing his own shield behind to keep over-penetration from damaging the tunnel.

"You're doing good Seth, things are moving along" Dr. Montez said as the senior remote viewer created his own shields for the marines to hide behind and advance. He soon realized defense was the best offense, as the UNSC forces could barely move forward without his help. Offense on his part seemed pointless, as there was still hostile fire flying towards friendlies. Less lives lost was always a victory, especially considering the enemy no longer controlled the beacon behind them. They could always retreat back to the room and try and fiddle with the beacon, but he wouldn't allow it, and kept a watchful eye on any runners.

"Energy is still peaked, though it is shrinking" Serina told him as the large energy ball around the pod started to diminish.

"More than likely it's bleeding off due to time as well as usage" Dr. Montez explained as he went over data.

"Why would it just bleed off?" Jenny asked.

"Too much being contained I would take a gander could fray his nervous system over long periods of time. I would guess if he held onto it that the dizziness and nausea would increase, as well as muscle spasms, digestive system degeneration, just to name a few problems. I'd need to see the effects to get a more accurate read out on what his condition would be" Dr. Montez explained.

"Let's hope the effects don't come to fruition" Jenny told him with worry.

"I hope so too" Montez replied and looked at Seth's pod.

Seth recharged Fred's shields multiple times as a Precursor caught him trying to make a run to new cover, his old rock now rubble and a smoking crater. Fred had been knocked around by the shots, but his shields kept going back up to full with the invisible friend watching out for him. Linda had gotten a ricochet on the same target four times with Seth bouncing the round and curving it without friction slowing it down, finally killing the alien soldier.

The battle was brutal, with firepower traded every inch, as even with Seth's help and his careful defense, marines were still dying. His work became more frantic and stressful as he kept up large shields for the marines to work behind, drag wounded friendlies, and call for medics. The wounded were far too few compared to the dead due to the hideous damage the alien weapons did. Even the elites would be deformed from a few hits once the shields went down compared to the plasma weaponry the UNSC and Sangheili forces were used to.

"Seth, status?" Dr. Montez asked.

"\_\*\*Currently? Halfway, but I've got a problem"\*\*\_\_ Seth told him as he felt dizzy.\_

"We're noticing. Your vitals are spiking, you need to dump the excess energy now and come out" Dr. Montez told him.

"\_\*\*The marines need all the help they can get, I can't leave now"\*\*\_\_ he replied.\_

"Don't make us emergency drop you. Get rid of that energy and get out now" Jenny growled. The energy ball around the pod had shrunk to a fourth of what it had started as, and suddenly disappeared as Seth sighed audibly and agreed.

Before he left, however, he activated the control room's security shielding and damaged the external systems to deactivate it. He'd be the only one who could take the shields down from the inside with no chance of the Precursors attempting to hole up as a last line of defense. It also cornered the Precursors and stopped them from trying to retreat to an area they couldn't get into.

Seth sighed and seemed somewhat satisfied with the shields up that the Precursors were no longer an immediate threat to humanity, he left the troops to fend for themselves and came back to his body.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

Elena suddenly heard the panicking voices of the marines as they acknowledged the defenses Seth had been producing for them inside the tunnels disappear. The UNSC forces would have a much slower time, and with much more casualties.

"What's the status down there?" she requested through the coms.

"The shields just disappeared! We're back to scrambling now! Whoever was watching out for us just abandoned the fight!" a marine reported.

"What the hell?" she whispered and shot back towards the \_Conundrum\_. She wanted answers. Seth wouldn't just leave them to rot, he needed a good reason to back off from protecting those soldiers. She landed with ease and got out of her cockpit, tossing her helmet to Ezekiel and telling him to rearm her fighter as she headed towards the 2nd R&D lab.

As she got through the DECON, she noticed Seth wasn't in the pod, but lying on a medical bed—shaking.

"Heart rate has spiked, his pupils are dilated, Seth, I need you to keep this in your mouth" Dr. Montez said as the nurses rushed around. Jenny pushed a mouth guard between his lips to keep him from biting his own tongue.

"What's going on?" Elena asked as she ran forward but was blocked by a nurse.

"Ma'am, we need to work, we're doing everything we can, you need to stay calm" he told her as she leaned her head around to see Seth. He

was shaking uncontrollably on the bed with an IV in his arm and warm blankets covering him. Diodes were attached to his forehead along with small band aides slapped all over his arms and legs.

"We need to get him to the medical ward, and prepped for surgery once this goes away" Dr. Montez explained as they slowly wheeled him towards the DECON. Elena saw Seth look at her with worry as his eyes kept darting around, trying to keep a lock on her with the impaired vision he was suffering from.

Elena darted around the nurse quickly before he could block her again and grabbed his right hand, holding it carefully. He gripped her tightly, almost crushing her smaller fingers in his own as he couldn't control his muscles.

"Seth, can you feel anything?" Jenny asked as they headed towards the medical ward.

"I-I'm r-really n-numbâ€¦ I c-can't f-f-feel muchâ€¦" he mumbled out.

"That's not the pod, his nerves must be screwed up from the overlap" Jenny told Dr. Montez and he nodded.

"Let's hope it's temporary" he replied as Elena looked confused.

"Overlap? What? What's going on?" Elena asked.

"We'll explain once this has been taken care of, right now he needs immediate medical attention" Montez told her as they reached the ward and entered the surgery room. The nurses lifted Seth off the wheeled medical table and onto the surgery platform, replacing the old blankets with newer ones from a heating shelf. Jenny pushed a medical hypo to his arm and then took a syringe filled with a bluish fluid and pushed it into the IV tube.

"Elena, we need you to stay out here" Dr. Montez said as he pushed her out of the surgery room.

"What? I need to be with him!" she growled as if insulted.

"You're no good in there, you need to stay out of the way, we'll take care of him, trust me. See to the battle, he had to leave a lot of men and women down there with no back up wondering what just happened" he told her and shut the doors. Elena was standing there with her mouth open as if to say something, but nothing came out. She looked around, not seeing anyone else nearby in the small hallway inside the medical ward, and took a deep breath.

She walked down the hallway and back towards her hangar, hoping to order Ezekiel to change her load out to any drone packages or maneuverable missiles. She needed to do what she could to pick up where Seth left off, though she was trying to fill shoes that were easily far too large for her without creating shields, recharging Spartan shields, and stopping Precursors from seeing marines moving by blinding them.

As she got to the hangar and gave Ezekiel new instructions, she opened up a small refrigerator and gulped down a bottle of water to

stay hydrated as well as chewed on a protein bar.

"Ma'am, is everything alright in there? Things are a little hectic downwind" Aurora said over Elena's earpiece.

"Things areâ€¦ nevermind. You said hectic, how?" Elena replied.

"Some of the tunnels are unstable now, and ground forces are having difficulty advancing without the terrain working against them as well. We've got the anti-air under control right now, but there are kill teams on the ground trying to attack us from forests. Each time we round-about they move to a new location" Aurora reported. Elena closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her fingers. A small headache was building and she did not want it while she was flying.

"Alright. I'm heading back down once rearmament is complete, drone packages, I'll go hunt them down. Assist the tunnel forces wherever possible, and keep the anti-air from picking off pelicans. Gripen out" Elena told her and cut coms. The entire battle had turned from a suicide mission to a battle of sheer attrition, with the entire fight looking like it would take more than a day to complete.

"Serina" Elena whispered into her coms.

"I'm here, and no I still don't have a connection. I can tell you that he turned on the shielding defenses to keep anyone out of the station until he came back, that much Tachi explained to him" Serina piped up over her earpiece.

"How is he?" Elena said quietly.

"He's just had the pacemaker removed, they're checking his leads as we speak and attaching a new one. His condition has improved from critical to serious and he is no longer shaking, though still nauseous. He's having time-distortion issues due to his nervous system calming down" Serina explained. Elena let out a stuttered sigh as she closed her eyes, worried sick about Seth.

"He'll be fine Elena, he's been through worse" Serina told her softly.

"It doesn't make me worry any less for him. What did he do to have that happen? And why didn't he start doing what he was doing at the beginning? He could have saved a lot of lives-" Elena asked.

"What he did to stop the loss of more lives and cause that amount of damage was intentionally fragment his own mind to produce more energy than he should have. That was the reason he was able to do what he did, but as you can see, there are side effects. This is the third time he has done this, the previous two times were a test, and providing a medical treatment to your loss of movement" Serina told her. Elena opened her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, expecting to see Serina in some form.

"What? This is how he repaired my spine?" she asked.

"Yes, and each time he does it, it drains the battery of the pacemaker and causes nausea, dizziness, potential hallucinationsâ€¦"



the list might go on, as we still don't know all the side effects that go with the significant power increase he has."

Elena felt so sorry for her soon to be husband. She admitted she was a bit annoyed that he hadn't started using this new ability immediately to save lives, but now that she knew it was an ability that wasn't fully understood and could hurt him, all of the annoyance went away and was replaced with worry.

"Lass, load out is complete. You're good to go" Ezekiel said as he came up behind her. She turned around and took her helmet from him and nodded.

"Time to go hunting. Don't wait up for me" she told him and he nodded. The mission she had just placed on herself would take some time as everyone else was devoted to retaking the tunnels. She had to make sure there were no threats coming from behind to attack the marines.

"Ma'am, new information" an engineer said as he jogged up to them. He pointed to a nearby com terminal and Elena nodded. She walked over to it and turned it on. Dare was on the other end.

"General, I just got updates on the rest of the fleet. General Corrington is in critical condition but alive, and giving active command over the fleet to you" Dare explained. Elena was shocked. Her mission was already scrubbed.

"I'm about to head down to the surface to handle kill teams hiding in the surrounding area damn itâ€¦| Christâ€¦|" Elena growled and took a deep breath.

"I apologize ma'am, but that can't happen. You're needed up here" Dare told her. She was the only flag officer now with Corrington severely injured, and she didn't know how to work the fleet. She could handle fighters easily, but she had no idea how to control frigates or battleships when a fight broke out.

"Alright, alright, damn itâ€¦|" Elena grumbled and ran her fingers through her bangs. Just then, she heard over coms that Aurora was coming back up for a rearmament.

"Colonel Shrike, report to the Conundrum for rearmament" Elena said over the coms.

"Ma'am, the ordinance for the Falcata is on the Infinity. Is there a problem?" Aurora asked confused.

"That's an order Colonel. I'll explain when you get here" Elena told her. Aurora acknowledged and deviated her trajectory towards the carrier.

"I know what you're going to ask her" Ezekiel said with his arms crossed over his chest.

"And what might that be?" she asked him.

"You're going to let her fly your fighter down there to finish the mission you can't right now lass" Ezekiel responded. Elena nodded slowly and looked up at her craft. She didn't like anyone else

playing with it, but it was a vital mission and she needed to assist in getting the fleet under control.

Aurora landed quickly and got out of her fighter, and then headed down to the hangar that Elena was in. As she walked in and took her helmet off, she looked between Ezekiel and Elena and saluted the General.

"Ma'am, Colonel Shrike reporting as ordered" Aurora said and stood at attention.

"At ease. You're going on a vital mission in my stead and in my fighter" Elena told her. Aurora turned and looked at Elena, confused.

"Ma'am?" she asked wondering what was going on.

"You heard me correctly. She's already geared up for the sortie, you just need to go down and complete it. You're hunting kill teams hiding in the terrain that may attempt to flank our troops retaking the tunnels. You'll be using drones. Stay frosty and keep out of direct combat, as you won't be equipped for long term dog fights or attacking anti-air" Elena explained to her.

"But ma'am-" Aurora started to object.

"Is there a problem with my orders Colonel?" Elena asked sternly. She didn't need to tell the blonde woman that she didn't like the idea either of someone else using her fighter. Pilots got attached to their fighters, they even named them and disliked when someone else would do anything beyond maintenance.

"No ma'am, I'll get right to it ma'am" Aurora said and stood at attention again.

"Good. I need to head to the bridge and figure this mess out. As you probably now know, Admiral Merins is dead, and Corrington is not fit to command in the medical ward on his ship. Good luck" Elena told her and Aurora saluted and walked towards Elena's fighter. She put her helmet on as Elena watched and walked up the stairs to the cockpit, and then hesitantly got inside and looked at the General.

"Take care of her Colonel, I'd like to have her back in the same condition she's going out" Elena told her quietly. Aurora nodded.

"I'll bring it back without a scratch ma'am. Is my Falcata being rearmed?" Aurora asked her.

"It is Colonel, it will be ready when you get back" Elena told her. Aurora nodded again and looked around, and then closed the cockpit as she remembered the button configuration deviated slightly from her own. Both fighters had a similar layout of controls, although the Black Blade was in fact more advanced due to the active camouflage and photo cell panels equipped.

Elena watched as the fighter was loaded onto the mag rail and the blast doors closed.

"Raven 1-1 changing callsign to Eagle 1-1. Ready for burn" Aurora

said over the coms.

"What theâ€¦" Aldric whispered. Sarah and the others were confused as well.

"Don't ask Commander, I have orders" Aurora told him.

"Copy that. Alright I'm acting command of Raven Squadron" Aldric said over the coms to the rest of the team.

"Eagle 1-1 you are clear for burn" CIC said, and she launched quickly and headed down towards the planet.

"Ma'am?" Aldric asked over the coms.

"You heard her Commander, do not ask. This was my choice" Elena told him.

"Understood ma'am. Raven 4-1 out" Aldric told her and cut coms. Elena growled under her breath and looked at Ezekiel. He wondered if he did anything wrong, but she shook her head and stormed out of the hangar towards the bridge.

\*\*[0600 hours, July 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth slowly woke up on the medical bed, and looked around. Elena was sitting next to him with a data pad in her lap, her left hand holding his right. She looked up at him and squeezed his hand comfortingly.

"How are you feeling?" she asked quietly.

"I'm alive, that's a good sign" he said groggily and looked at his shoulder. There was a bandage covering an area just under his left collar bone, along with a small IV inserted into his arm.

"Oh shit, sorry, I didn'tâ€¦ I mean, how is everyone do-" he started and she brought her hand to his mouth to calm him down.

"They're still fighting, though they're pretty much in clean up mode right now. You left them in a bit of a bind, but they made do with everything happening. Don't worry" she cooed to him and squeezed his hand gently. He squeezed back as he looked at her. She looked exhausted, with new grey strands streaking through her silky black hair. Being a General was wearing on her.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Oh six" she told him. He brought his other hand up to his forehead and rubbed it a bit.

"Have you gotten any sleep?" he asked her. She shook her head.

"Admiral Merins is dead, and Corrington is in critical condition. I'm the highest rank available to get things under control" she told him. He looked surprised and looked around the room for a second as if someone would give him an answer to a question that wasn't asked of him, before looking back at her.

"How are you holding up?" he asked and rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand.

"Better, now that you're awake and no longer having your nervous system failing. Dr. Montez did some tests. Your heart rate shot to over 600 suddenly during the use of your new ability" she told him. He winced as he knew she had found out.

"Yeah I had been meaning to explain what was going on" he started but trailed off.

"I got the gist of it from the doctor and Serina. I understand that this needs to be a last resort as well. I know I know that it's not going to stop you from doing it again, but please be careful ok? At first I thought the assistance you were providing was great, and was a bit angry that you hadn't started doing it immediately to save half the wings out there, but now that I know it does this to you" she trailed off and held his hand clasped between both of hers.

"We knew the death toll would be high hon. I didn't start off with my heavy hitter because we still didn't know all of the side effects 600 huh? Without the pacemaker working?" he asked. She nodded.

"One of the problems with my heart is if it reaches such a high bpm, unlike most people who would have their heart simply fall apart or explode, the signals get mixed up and suddenly make my heart flat line after overworking itself. The pacemaker stops me from having that happen. Since the battery was drained, well you know what could have happened" he explained to her.

"It's hard to believe your heart can reach that speed, I thought the maximum was 200" she told him.

"Aaron has actually exceeded me once with the record of 680, but he was hospitalized for a month while they repaired the tissue around his heart" he chuckled and looked up at her. She wasn't amused.

"Sorry, didn't mean to well sorry" he told her and she nodded.

Elena sat there for a minute in silence as Seth looked at the ceiling.

"How's the fleet look beyond you being the highest rank?" Seth suddenly asked.

"Half of it is gone, and what's left won't last another engagement. We're also stuck here until a supply fleet can come and bring new drives, and then install them. We're working on repairs, I just hope there aren't any other fleets coming to finish us off. We're limping at best, crawling away from a licking at worst. We've already put out an emergency call for any other fleets, but it'll be two days before they get here" she told him quietly. Seth sighed and closed his eyes thinking.

"No asteroid fields to position mines, no spare moons to sling shot around to surprise, damaged ships, I'm in a medical bed, ground troops are still fighting to retake key location, enemy has

significant firepower" Seth whispered as he opened his eyes again and looked at the ceiling.

"That's what I just said" Elena spoke to him confused.

"Just bullet pointing each thing that's happening, I do it all the time to find a solution hon. I'm speaking to myself" he chuckled and smiled, and it lightened the mood.

"I'm not marrying someone that needs a psyche eval am I?" Elena chuckled and returned the smile.

"We all have to be a little crazy to do what we do" he replied. She leaned in and kissed him tenderly.

"I should get back to the pod and keep watch on the surr-" Seth started to tell her and she placed a finger over his mouth.

"Not a chance. You need to rest, you can scout later. Dr. Montez said you weren't up to snuff yet until he gets a physical out of you, and he won't be up until this afternoon, like me. He's been assisting with incoming wounded the entire night, and I've been getting casualty lists from the rest of the fleet" she told him and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. They were burning and her eyelids were falling, and she knew she had to get some sleep.

Seth grabbed Elena and gently pulled her into the small medical bed next to him.

"I still have god knows how many reports to read through and damage details to oversee Seth, I can't-" she started and he put his finger over her lips.

"A good officer knows when they can make a difference with their work and when their efforts will do more harm than good. You're halfway to collapsing in exhaustion, you've got how many kills from those fighters, and everyone is going to need you at your best if the shit hits the fan later to lead them" he told her as he caressed her cheek. She sighed and nodded.

"Asshole" she mumbled.

"I love you too hon" he replied with a giggle. She smirked and gave him a peck on the cheek, and then leaned her head against his right shoulder. She was out like a light in under a minute. Seth, on the other hand, just laid there looking at her sleep, running ways of getting everyone out of the situation they were in through his head. Half of the fleet was wiped out; the other half was damaged; thousands of troops were dead planet side and the rest were still fighting for their lives retaking the beacon. The control room was still sealed off, and he was the only one that could open it since there was no outside access now, so that provided him some measure of relief.

Seth looked off at the ceiling and thought of the troops down below, still fighting. Once the Precursors realized they had lost control of the situation, they would try and find a way to either go through other tunnels to escape and regroup in the forests and mountains, or fight to the death. From what he had seen, they cut and ran often enough when things seemed hopeless. What he also knew, was in any

ground engagement with little contact with the ships above that special operations always kept an emergency signal of some sort. He hoped they didn't have one, or another fleet was going to be on its way to finish off the crippled fleet and ground forces they had.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Epic Score "Hercules' Test"]\*\*

"Three, Two, One" Buck whispered and the Rookie nodded. Both of them popped from their cover just as Kelly and Ash shot from their hidey hole and threw a satchel of flashbangs rigged to explode one after another near the enemy positions. All of their visors were pre-set to handle the blinding lights, but they doubted the enemy was ready for the attack.

The Precursors threw up their arms to shield their eyes as round after round from assault rifles and SMGs sprayed them, dropping their shields slowly as the enemy fired wildly to repel the enemy they couldn't see, the one that was smaller than them. Some of the Precursors tried to back off and run, but they ended up ramming into each other or into the walls of the tunnel, while the Spartans concentrated their fire on each target as the ODSTs and marines kept the remainder occupied.

"Nine down; that makes what, a gazillion?" Buck asked as the firefight died down and the UNSC forces slowly advanced to the next area of the tunnel system.

"Hell, I lost count how many we've taken out" Ash commented. The Rookie shrugged at his commanding officer and Buck looked at the rest of his team. Mickey had taken some plasma fire to his leg armor but he could still walk, though his skin was more than likely burned to a crisp under. A medic was tending to him while Milo set up sensors along the tunnels to attempt to keep an eye on seismic activity as well as enemy retreat patterns. He couldn't do his main job which was artillery spotter inside the tunnels, so he resorted to providing assistance to the techs with scanners and keeping track of enemy movement when not providing suppression fire.

Fred had been beaten heavily by a Precursor soldier and was being tended to by another medic. Linda had dropped her sniper rifle and resorted to a BR-55 due to low ammo. Pelicans were still being shot at from the surrounding terrain, though Eagle 1-1 and a few other fighters were assisting with hunter killer actions against the stealthed kill teams hiding outside.

"One last area, then we take the flanking tunnels" John told everyone as they reloaded fresh clips into their weapons and nodded.

"God it'll feel good once these bastards are gone!" Dutch grumbled. Everyone agreed. They were all worked to the bone in fending off the enemy and gaining a foothold in the tunnels for the past few hours, taking shifts with other marines to fall back, eat, sleep for an hour or rest, and then get back up and fight again. None of them could stop to actually relax; there was no telling what would happen if they slowed down. All of the food they were eating was dried or MREs, and their water supply was slowly being replenished by arriving pelicans. The ammunition crates were a god send when Linda shot

towards the last transport and opened the boxes, only to find no sniper rounds.

"Coming on the next trip; don't worry" Jack told her and she nodded to him behind her golden visor. As they removed all the supply crates, medics pushed wounded soldiers into the pelicans and stacked them along the walls with the seats in an upright position, allowing thirty wounded and four medics to come up each round the pelicans took.

"This is nutsâ€|" Milo whispered and Jack took him aside and patted his son on the shoulders.

"Hey, just do what you can, follow your orders, and you'll be fine ok? They're tough, but they aren't invincible" Jack told him.

"You sound like some sergeant I once knew" Milo chuckled.

"Which sergeant?" Jack asked as his eyebrows furrowed.

"Some Master Sergeant, what's his nameâ€| Johnson" Milo told him. Jack chuckled. John looked in their direction, clearly hearing the Corporal name his deceased friend.

"Well I'm a Lieutenant, but what do I know about ground combat right? Just keep your head screwed on tight" he told him. Jack brought his hand up to his son's head and patted him gently on the helmet. Milo nodded and smiled, and then walked off to grab more ammunition for his SMG and M6C.

Once the wounded were finished being loaded, Jack lifted his pelican off and headed back up.

"Alright, one more push, then we can actually rest a bit" Buck told them as the marines gathered their ammo and headed back to their posts. The Precursors were just around the corner and further down. They were evacuating, and didn't want to keep their position now that they knew the control room was lost until a second fleet could come. Everyone hoped that was never going to happen, though hope didn't matter with the bad luck they seemed to be having that day.

## 22. Counter Defense

\*\*[1340 hours, July 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth had finally gotten Dr. Montez to give him a clean bill of health. After a rather large amount of tests involving his eye sight, balance, nerves as well as muscle control and energy as he ran on a treadmill, he was finally cleared. Elena had watched the entire time, wanting to know if anything was out of the ordinary with his body. She had woken up once he had called Montez to the medical room, which was around noon.

"Alright Seth, we believe your time limit is half an hour to contain that amount of energy. Once you've reached that limit, you need to dump the remainder, as it seems to start degrading your bodily functions" Montez told him.

"What exactly got degraded, and was it only temporary?" Seth asked, though he kept giving glances towards Elena. She was worried something was irreparable in his body.

"Your digestive system for one was screwed up by what happened. You evacuated everything in your intestines and bladder during the surgery. You're fine now, as the muscles have regained their normal contraction control" Montez explained to him. Seth felt a bit embarrassed that Elena knew he had relieved himself in the middle of surgery involuntarily, but she didn't even bat an eye.

"General Gripen to the bridge" Cortana said over the coms. Elena sighed and looked over at Seth.

"I'll be alright hon, don't worry" he told her and squeezed her hand gently. She squeezed back and told him she'd be back later.

"I'll more than likely be in the lab outside the pod so you don't worry" he told her. She seemed to relax a little bit knowing he wouldn't jump right back in so quickly after having his body nearly fail, and nodded at him in approval. She then left as he got dressed and walked with Montez.

"Is there anything you need to tell me that you didn't say in front of her?" Seth asked.

"Why would I hide your medical condition? You two are going to be married are you not? She's got clearance for anything directly involving you. I told you both what we've found out" Montez replied. Seth nodded in agreement after some hesitation. Some things he didn't want her to worry about, like his health. He didn't want to be a burden on her.

They both entered into DECON and waited as the small cleaning room grudgingly let them into the 2nd R&D lab, and then separated to continue their work. Seth acknowledged Jenny's presence as she organized medications nearby, some of them anesthetics; others were nutrient solutions or antibiotics. A few she was remixing as they actually separated into two different chemicals every six hours.

"Seth, do you remember what you had once asked of me? The information involving the prototype fighter that we couldn't find any files of?" Tachi asked as Seth went over data other remote viewers had been compiling on the shipyard.

"Yeah, you found something?" Seth asked as Tachi's avatar popped up. Tachi grinned, his eyes glowing and his enthusiasm apparent.

"You'll never believe this. It was a design that was supposedly wiped from all records by GRID" the AI told him with a small chuckle. Seth was stunned.

"WE made it? How? I thought Dr. Wright never mind. So who was the designer?" Seth asked.

"Don't have any information on it, and the original blueprints were based on excavated materials from a place on Mars, mainly a titanium mine" Tachi replied, and brought up the blueprints on his data pad. Seth blinked, clearly surprised. The design was unmatched by the



Black Blade Mk II or the Falcata. The problem was there simply wasn't the required technology to make it a real fighter. With the scientist's reverse-engineering forerunner technology, however, the fighter could become a very viable replacement for both the current models today.

"Could this fighter be made right now?" Seth asked. Tachi shook his head.

"The required technology hasn't been figured out yet, but it will be, very soon. Once that is done, it's simply a matter of shoving this blueprint in front of skunk work's faces and telling them make it work" Tachi told him. Seth looked down at the blueprints. They were very basic, mostly aerial designs for some wings, nothing concrete in how the fighter would look. There were some scribbles showing cockpit designs, weapon bays, controls, but everything seemed beyond what they were using right now.

"Hehâ€¦ eventually" Seth chuckled. He could only imagine getting something like this made for Elena, and seeing her handle an entire fleet of Precursor ships by herself. Could she do it? If the fighter was as advanced as it was, she very well could with her skills.

"Exactly how far away is the research?" Seth asked Tachi. Tachi's avatar flickered for a few seconds.

"Five years? More than likely less. However, there would also have to be a redesign of parts and materials to use from the research that would allow it to be produced, and even then, would more than likely be extremely costly. The Black Blade and Falcata are working quite well for what they were designed for; it's doubtful they would be replaced so fast" Tachi told him. Seth nodded. The Sabre still hadn't replaced the Super Long Sword IIs yet, and it would be at least five more years before that would come to fruition. The Falcata and Black Blades were still specialist fighters.

"Could the newer research be used on anything else beyond this?" Seth asked. Tachi smirked.

"Seth; would you like to see what these blueprint's materials and technology were based off of?" the AI asked him. The agent stood there slightly annoyed.

"Do I even have to respond?" he replied. A wire mesh replaced Tachi's avatar with another formâ€¦ a Seeker. Seekers were forerunner war frames, giant mechanized armors built to replace older war sphinxes. Seth cocked an eyebrow and smirked.

"Soâ€¦ we're basing the fighter's capabilities on mechs?" he asked. Tachi replaced the mecha's picture with his avatar and nodded.

"Are we designing mechs?" Seth asked as he looked over at Jenny and Dr. Montez.

"They're in the works, but it will be some time before anything viable is on the drawing board. From what I've found, I'd say ten years, and doubtful they will be on par with a war sphinx right from the start" Tachi reported. Seth was about to say something, opened his mouth, and then closed it and looked up, visualizing a large mech

towering over him.

"Noâ€¦ nonononoâ€¦" he chuckled and shook his head as he looked back down at the holo dais nearby.

"It would depend on the military requirement I would guess, or civilian use" Tachi commented.

"Yes, but unless it has some impressive defenses, it is target practice for tanks and fighters" Seth grumbled.

"Who knows what will happen in ten years? The only certainty is that no one will live to see the future unless the current mission is dealt with" Tachi commented. Seth nodded and picked up another data pad, stopped and glanced upwards one more time.

"Stuck in your head huh?" Tachi chuckled.

"No, I was just thinking that's all. We still need to get that beacon to open up inbound communications, not to mention find whichever Precursor currently has thought control of the shipyard, as well as scout out any other fleets coming to attack. Add in the fact I have no idea where we're going to get reinforcementsâ€¦ Serina" Seth said.

"Hmm?" the AI hummed out as she wondered what the agent was going to ask.

"You might want to request the medical ship to come in now. Call up Metfield, let him know we're in a bit of a crisis" Seth told her quietly.

"I'll let him know. Would you like some good news?" Serina asked as her avatar appeared and she grinned on the dais. Seth cocked an eyebrow at her.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Elena sat in her office working through requisition reports. Wings from other ships were already wiped out, so extra supplies and spare parts were being taken and jury rigged to repair the ships. She just needed to know which ones had priority. Some of the spare ordinance was taken apart and turned into small mines, as the remainder of the fighters assisted down on the surface while tugs built minefields up above. They wouldn't do much unless the enemy was right on top of them, but hopefully Seth could figure out a way to make use of them.

She hadn't realized it until now, but her office was easier to handle for her day to day work than her quarters, with less moving around and quick retrieval of information. Her desk acted as a recharge panel for the data pads, holo dais to talk to Cherry and the other AIs, tactical holo map once everything was taken off the top of it, and terminal. She kept an M6D in the top drawer on the right, and a spare clip. In the others, she kept a picture of her and Seth together and a chocolate bar as well as mints. Every other drawer was still empty aside from one or two spare bolts used in putting together the desk.

"Havin difficulties ma'am?" Cherry piped up.

"Yeah, something like thatâ€¦ I hope everyone else is having an easier time than I am at getting things back in one piece. How's the fight down below?" Elena asked as she looked up at Cherry's avatar on her desk.

"Still goin, but I don't thinks it's goin strong ma'am. Those marines are havin one heck of a fight" the female AI replied. Cherry brought up a small list of supply requests from the ground forces. Elena gawked. So far, the marines had abandoned not using explosives entirely and swapped to whatever they had available. The ammunition usage was astronomical compared to any other fight they've had against a similar sized force. They were chewing through bullets like they were popcorn, and still barely holding their own against the Precursor remnants.

"Have they reached the control room yet?" Elena asked hoping she'd get a yes.

"Yesus ma'am. Now they're just bein givin heck in the other tunnels. It's tough on those boys and gals down there. Do yousâ€¦ do yous wanna see the casualty report ma'am?" Cherry asked quietly. Elena closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

"Give it to me, how bad is it?" she asked. Cherry brought up the list. Thousands dead from one Precursor ground force. UNSC and Sangheili defenses just were not enough to protect against the powerful weapons the Precursors were using.

"Wasn't there a planned technology swap between Sangheili and UNSC forces? What the fuck happened to that? Did we get ANYTHING from those bastards?" Elena growled. She was feeling the stress and took a deep breath to calm down.

"The Elites are not exactly in a goods position to give us anythin ma'am. No scientists, barely any farmersâ€¦ they's barely can make their owns food for demselves. We're in a better position than theys are, what withs half a fleet still chuggin away" Cherry responded.

"Half a fleet that can't retreat, that has significant damage, two flag officers down and most of its fighters wiped outâ€¦ Cortana was working on the odds and battle tactics if the Precursors come back correct? Is she finished with them?" Elena asked. Cortana suddenly popped up right next to Cherry and walked around on the desk top.

"I'm here General. Our oddsâ€¦ don't look good" Cortana told her quietly.

"Any word on General Corrington?" Elena asked softly.

"They've put him in a temporary comaâ€¦ he had third degree burns as well as damage to his left eye and left armâ€¦ lung punctureâ€¦ one of his kidneys was damaged so they've replaced thatâ€¦" Cortana started to name off medical conditions that Corrington had. Elena put her hand up to stop the female AI from saying any further.

"Alright. I get the picture. God this is a messâ€¦ can't retreat, can't fight a frontal atta-" Elena started to say.

"Elena, this is Seth, do you hear me?" she heard over her private coms.

"Seth? What's wrong honey?" she asked.

"Nothing's wrong, Serina just gave us some hope. Thank god she's here" Seth sounded excited. Elena looked between Cortana and Cherry. Cherry seemed indifferent, but Cortana seemed slightly miffed that she was relegated to a lower role under Serina.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Serina sent a tight emission pulse sensory scan out to any agency communications satellites we have nearby. It wasn't to talk to anyone, well, yet. She found a fleet of Sangheili nearby, just barely out of our normal sensor range, and blocked by a nebula so coms don't go through. We would have missed them if she didn't do that" Seth reported. He sounded like he was trying to contain his enthusiasm. Elena's heart beat a little faster. They really did have some backup nearby; they just had to talk to them.

"That's great news!" Elena said cheerily to him.

"I'm going to get in the pod and go talk to them, bring them over. Tachi has calculated that it'll take the fleet about three days to get here with their slip space drives. After, I'm going to head down and try and get the control room to receive inbound coms from our AIs, and then try and reinforce the tunnels" Seth told her.

"Reinforce the tunnels?" Elena asked, wondering how he would do that. They didn't have the resources to spend on making the tunnels stronger. All of the materials were needed right now to close breaches in armor on the ships.

"Don't worry; I'm not using any of our supplies. Dmitri also had an interesting idea if you want to hear about it" Seth told her.

"Do tell" she replied.

"Some of the Sangheili ships in the area aren't combat worthy, there is too much damage done to them. We believe with some effort we could get a few scrapped for parts and repair the ones that can be salvaged, with Aaron and I doing most of the heavy lifting alongside the tugs" he explained. Elena thought for a moment.

"How many personnel would you need to do that?" she asked. She hoped he wouldn't say hundreds due to the fact that almost all of the fleet was just trying to keep themselves alive without trying to piece together Sangheili ships with chewing gum and duct tape.

"We'd need about a hundred people, and any escape pods from the destroyed UNSC ships. Any personnel in them would get another chance to get some revenge for 7th fleet" he told her.

"I'll do what I can to send them over" she told him.

"Don't do it right now, we've still got a full plate on our hands. This will take a bit of time to get everything up to snuff. I'll let

you know once we have the rest of the "to do list" finished, though starting on the smaller scavenging wouldn't be a bad idea" Seth replied. Elena acknowledged.

"Seth, be careful ok?" she said, the lilt of worry in her voice emanating through the coms. She now saw what the pod could do to him if anything went wrong.

"I'll play it safe hon. Love" Seth replied with a chuckle.

"Love" she responded back and the coms cut.

"Ma'am, I bes thinkin Agent Franklin is on the right track for the fix up of those ships, but I don't think he bes needin a crew for em" Cherry commented.

"What would you suggest?" Elena asked. Cherry looked at Cortana, and both female AIs smiled.

"Wells, one ship doesn't exactly take up much of our time, and you knows how we gals get bored often right? We could keep control over those there purple ships once their up and runnin" Cherry explained. Elena knew Cortana was probably the one getting the worst of it being cooped up in the 1st R&D lab pouring over forerunner technology while Tachi got to have all the fun of working with Precursor data.

"That's an idea. I'll let him know once he's back" Elena told them, and both AIs nodded in agreement and disappeared from her desk.

"General Gripen?" she heard over the coms. Elena sighed and opened up the channel.

"Yes?" she asked. Dare was on the other side.

"Just got a report, the \_Fording Through Darkness\_ is having reactor trouble, they're evacuating their crew and shutting power down" the captain explained. Elena groaned.

"So we're losing another shipâ€¦ greatâ€¦ what's the status on the \_Shogun Dynasty\_? They've finished repairs correct?" Elena asked. She hoped for no more bad news, but this was war. Things tended to jump out of the woodwork for her.

"They're patched up, and so are we" Dare started, and Elena relaxed as a wave of relief washed over her "and now they're sending whatever spare personnel over to other ships to speed things up. We have no idea if the enemy has reinforcements coming or if we're in a dark zone."

"Hopefully they don't know what's happening yetâ€¦ any word on the supply fleet? What about 2nd fleet? Aren't they in the area?" the young General asked. She needed to know her options.

"2nd fleet left a week ago for another task, though we've sent requests for assistance. 3rd fleet is coming to reinforce our position, without blowing their drives. Will take them a week to get here though. 2nd fleet I doubt we'll get combat assistance from, as they have a light escort and are mostly intel gathering. If we can

hold out for 3rd, we might be alright" Dare told her.

"And a fleet Seth and Serina found of Sangheili ships. He's in the process of going to talk to them and bring them here" Elena commented. Dare arched an eyebrow.

"Elites? Near here? Where?" the captain asked. She didn't have the sensor know how that the GRID AI had, or access to hidden satellites around the galaxy.

"About three days away from us, behind a nebula. They were beyond our sensors, but Serina found them. They also believe we can scrap and repair some of the less damaged Elite ships and if everything goes well, allow the AIs to control them." Dare looked at her as if she was crazy for a moment, mulling the information over in her head.

"General, with all due respectâ€¦" Dare started to say.

"Agent Franklin and others will be doing most of the piecing together of the parts, we just have to connect wires and pipes, and then weld anything they didn't touch. It's an edge Veronica, and we need every one of them we can find right now" Elena told her sternly.

"Yes ma'am. I'll have a head count done of engineers willing to go for a spacewalk. Let me know when it happens" Veronica told her and nodded. Elena thanked her and ended communications. They might have a chance after all.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Seth walked with a purpose down the hallway towards the bridge. He was feeling absolutely awesome now that the Elite fleet was coming to assist them. At first they were scared that their gods had come back, and begged to hear his wishes. He played the part easily, and told them their orders were to come to the fleet's aid and protect them from the invaders. The Armada of Unrequited Loyalty was coming.

He had also worked with Aaron coming back to help him reinforce the tunnels and put up blockades of anything nearby to seal off exit points. There needed to be only two points of entrance, the front and an emergency retreat tunnel just in case. Thelma was still under the weather from the previous battle, and wouldn't be able to assist them, though she was willing to let Earth forces know of their predicament.

Seth stood at the front of the bridge and watched Elena talking to Dare involving reworking the positions of minefields. He coughed and looked around. Elena looked over at him and smiled.

"We just got a com report. They're coming" Elena told him quietly as she walked up and stood in front of him.

"Tunnels are fixed up as well. I'd suggest dropping every drone we have down there" he reported. She nodded in agreement.

"What if they try to board us?" Dare asked.

"They didn't last time, and I don't think they'll do it this time. The beacon is too precious to waste forces on trying to fight inside

our ships. They'll send whatever they can below. They also can't really fit inside our ships, which adds to that point" Seth told her.

"Why do you say that?" Aldric asked from behind. Both female officers and the agent turned around.

"Because that's what I'd do. Force my way through the fleet, take over the beacon where the fleet can't fight back except with weak ground forces-" Seth started to say. Aldric coughed.

"Sorry, no offense meant by it Spartan, but we are weak compared to them. Elites are weak compared to them. The only race I can think of that MIGHT stand a chance toe to toe would be a Lekgolo colony in armor, and that's even difficult to see" Seth commented. Aldric hesitantly nodded. Spartans were strong, but the Precursors were naturally larger, stronger, and had far better technology.

"Now, once I'd force my way through the fleet and had ground superiority, flip around and finish off the rest of the UNSC in disarray. The HAMMER drones would stop that andâ€¦" Seth trailed off as a thought occurred to him.

"Seth?" Elena asked and put her hand on his shoulder as he stared off into space. He came back to his surroundings as he looked at her.

"ARGUS drones work in space don't they?" he asked.

"Specially prepared ones do. We'd have to swap out the engine pods for ion thrusters, but it's possible. I've used them in the past during the scouting of Delivance" Elena told him. He looked over at Dare, and then behind him towards Aldric.

"Any flying drones, we need in space. Sentinel swarms" he told them with a small grin.

"They don't exactly move like sentinels, but enough of them would definitely hassle the fighters like bug bites" Dare caught on to his thought. They'd do almost nothing to the enemy capital ships, but they didn't need to. They just needed to make sure the smaller fighters were taken care of.

"All of this work for an enemy that may or may not comeâ€¦" Elena trailed off as she looked out a viewport on the bridge towards the rest of the fleet.

"They're coming, I know personally" Seth said quietly. They all looked at him.

"Serina picked up some traffic on two stealth com buoys before they were taken out. Far side of Carina-Sagittarius arm just at the edge which means they just got there, unknown solar system, no habitable planets. They're massing a fleet there. One of those bastards down below popped smoke. Its slow going, but they're there. Must take them a while to get to us" the GRID agent told his friends around him. Elena gasped.

"How much time do we have?" Dare asked.

"From Serina's calculations, a little less than three full days given how they're building their fleet. We totaled it at just under fifty ships so far, with two hundred fifty fighters. Hopefully, the Elites will get here before they do. If not, we just have to hold out as long as we can. They cannot get that beacon, I cannot stress this enough" Seth told them all sternly.

"Is this beacon really worth all this?" Aldric asked.

"It could change how we build ships in this galaxy Commander. Imagine having a fleet of thousands, not hundreds, moving everywhere. Neither Elites nor humans would ever worry about something threatening our races again with the armadas we could create in less than a few weeks. Think about it, making a carrier in less than a month instead of a few years? With even more advanced technology than we have today?" Seth explained. They all nodded. If it fell into the wrong hands, it would be the end for them. If they could control it, they wouldn't have to worry about the Precursors ever trying to invade.

"We should get back to work then, there's a lot to do" Elena said and they all nodded. The General walked out of the bridge and towards her office as Seth walked with her.

"There's something else I need to tell you, and it's your decision" he said quietly. She looked up at him standing there at her office door.

"What's wrong?" she asked curiously.

"Aaron and I believe we have two choices. We can spend our remaining time repairing the Elite ships out thereâ€¦ or there's another option involving us going out and sabotaging enemy fighters until they come, either slow them down or let them have it once they get here" he told her. She sighed and looked slightly annoyed, but calmed down.

"Sethâ€¦ I hope you aren't thinking of using that thing you do, that scares the life out of me" she started to say.

"I won't, at least Dr. Montez also agrees with you. Until we have more information on side effects, that's relegated to emergencies, and it won't come to that if we play our cards right. So which one? Sabotage or repair?" he asked. She thought for a minute, as carefully as ever. He waited patiently as she sat in her chair, thinking.

"Sabotage. The spare ships we may not even get working correctly, and I'd rather not risk tearing apart ships we don't know much about and not expecting them to explode in our faces. I still barely understand how you do what you do, but considering you have experience with it, it seems simpler to use what we have now. Don't destroy the ships outright however. I'll let the AIs know they won't be playing with Sangheili ships" she told him. He arched an eyebrow.

"I know it would slow them down, but it would give them a heads up that someone was there, and they might haveâ€¦ defensesâ€¦ against youâ€¦ besides, letting them come with half of their fleet ready to fall apart when it gets here could give us a far better advantage. If their ships are taken out before they leave, they could send for



twice as many" she told him.

"Or not come at all and give up considering their losses. Eventually they'll realize they don't have the upper hand. Come to think about it, they really don't have the upper hand" he said, and then scrunched his face up in thought.

"Yeah, I thought about that as well. All the information I've heard say they use neural physics, and that it's nigh indestructible, but our weapons are doing damage to them. Maybe they've gotten sloppy over the years?" Elena commented.

"Maybeâ€¦ or maybe there's some sort of tech they're missing that allows them to do what the forerunners claimed in the data. It could be any number of things. Maybe with the forerunners using the halos in the past weakened their technology enough for us to have a shot at survival? Or maybe the halos have a lingering effect in the background towards their equipment? Maybe they aren't as strong with the numbers they lost in the forerunner war that was stated in the shield world's archives and are rebuilding something like a hive mind? This is all just a hypothesis, nothing concrete of course" he told her. She nodded in understanding.

"I should head back and do what I can. I love you" he said and walked over to her desk and gave her a quick kiss.

"Love you too" she replied, and he opened and walked out of the door. Elena took a deep breath and returned to the reports coming in from the rest of the fleet and the battle still taking place below.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

"Watch your corners" Fred whispered as the Spartan team slowly moved up a tunnel. Seth had zipped through quickly to close off many of the branch off paths so that they couldn't be flanked, and had reinforced the sides and structural integrity of the remaining openings, but there were still Precursor soldiers skulking in the dark depths trying to hold out against the encroaching UNSC forces. They had to be extremely careful, as even one shot from the alien weaponry dropped their shields immediately and knocked them across the rocky underground landscape, sometimes destabilizing the shield emitters completely. Ash was a testament to the effect when he had to be sent back for suit repairs due to one misstep to dodge a round. He was physically fine aside from some serious bruises on his ribcage and left shoulder, but he could still fire a weapon and he was a Spartan.

The super soldier team consisting of Fred, Kelly, John and Lucy snuck closer to a turn and peeked around quickly before ducking back. A quick CRACK! Resounded from the walls of the passage as an alien round smacked into the corner and blew off a chunk of rock and other materials, cascading pulverized soil over Lucy's armor as she backed off, and John barely ducked the round continuing on to ricochet off the back wall further down the tunnel and slam into the ground.

Fred instinctively threw a cluster of grenades now around the corner as they backed off, and heard the explosions and some odd language spoken temporarily, before they returned to the corner and opened fire on three soldiers. The Spartans backed off quickly down the

tunnel as the fight raged like a game of tug of war, the Precursor soldiers charging to throw off the fulisade of ammunition thrown at them then retreating to their hiding place as the Spartans surged forward to keep their shields down. They took two down before a squad of marines came up behind and provided the final spray of rounds while the Spartans reloaded.

"This is Blue team, tunnel 2-4 is clear" Fred grumbled over the coms as they checked their surroundings and saw a collapsed section blocking off any sort of retreat the Precursor troops had, courtesy of their latent remote viewer above.

"Tunnel 2-6 clear" he heard in response from two platoons of marines in another passage.

"Tunnel 2-8 requesting assistance!" John heard over the coms. Renee's squad was in that area. He didn't even think, he just bolted with Linda and Fred right behind him, Kelly checking the bodies left behind. The three Spartans hauled as fast as they could with their enhanced agility and powered armor, and bee lined straight to the tunnel she had requested assistance in. Marine bodies and limbs were scattered along the way as they leapt over rocky outcroppings and over stalagmites.

Renee was bunched against a stalagmite that was being peppered by plasma, with no chance of retreat. Milo was further up prepping a rocket launcher on his shoulder as two Precursor soldiers came towards Renee's hiding spot, not even noticing Milo was behind them. Renee blind fired before more plasma erupted, and she scrunched up as small as she could.

"Suppression fire!" the rest of her platoon yelled as they were engaging as fast as they could, but they were still trying to stay alive as well with return fire. A piece of the stalagmite fragmented off and sliced a cut across her left cheek, making her instinctively turn away and scream in pain.

Milo let loose the rocket and had it slam into the back of the leading alien trooper, knocking it over. The invader struggled to get up as the rest of the platoon peppered its location with their rounds. John charged forward, aimed his assault rifle at the head of the fallen soldier and opened up, the second trooper noticing the attack from behind and the rocket launcher the marine had. It turned to engage the new threat, ignoring Renee for a time as John rushed to assist.

"Oh fuckâ€|" Milo gulped as he backed away, realizing he had nowhere to go as he fired the second rocket, missing the turning Precursor. If he went down the rest of the tunnel he'd surely run into more aliens and be killed, and if he ran forward he'd be killed by the charging alien trooper. John had to make a choice; either protect Renee with the fallen trooper near her and let Milo die, or save Milo who was still standing and fighting the enemy soldier while Renee was helped by the other Spartans and her platoon. Could he really ignore the woman he cared for to protect another marine?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a plasma grenade was thrown from a long distance, and hit its mark, stuck to the charging soldier's head. Running up right behind the Spartans, was a white and silver armored elite. Fin'Tuyokee was back, and his improved armor showed his new

rank. Twin plasma blades were ignited as he charged in with a battle cry, his squad of elites at his back firing at the downed alien trooper as John chose to take on the still standing Precursor.

Both Spartan and Elite came at the huge soldier as it aimed its weapon at the small marine.

"I am so screwed!" Milo gulped as he threw his rocket launcher at the soldier, and John emptied his magazine into the back of the behemoth. The Precursor turned around to notice the two new combatants coming at him, and used his tail on the back of his head to try and spear the Elite. Fin dove and rolled as John slammed a new mag in and opened up, the Precursor now realizing the green armored soldier posed a ranged threat. He opened up on the Spartan and he dashed across the ground, barely inches from the blasts as Fin closed.

John aimed at the alien's hand, hoping to knock the weapon from its grasp to at least slow the giant down. As the Precursor fired at him and John returned the favor, the large alien swept its hand across the ground to try and knock Fin away, which turned out to be a very bad move. As the arm rushed to hit the Sangheili, he brought his blades point first towards the oncoming obstruction, and speared both of them into the forearm of the Precursor as he took the force of the impact with the trained skill of a Sangheili Field Marshall.

The Precursor roared in pain as the blades punched through his shields from the beating it had taken, and John's rounds pierced into the fingers of the trooper's other hand, forcing it to drop its weapon. Fin rolled with the blow and slid right over the arm, using the maneuver to sever the forearm from the rest of the body like a piece of salami on a cutting board. The Precursor roared in pain as its other hand grabbed at the wound, barely missing Fin as he back rolled from the large appendage and then again when the spine like tail tried to impale him.

John aimed at his head with his rifle and fired, the rounds piercing into its armor and causing it to howl, as Fin activated a set keystroke on his blades and threw them, the points piercing right through its skull, killing it. The trooper went lifeless and collapsed to the ground as Fin walked up to it, his armored hooves stomping across the dirt floor slowly and removed his blades from the torn apart head.

Fin turned around and sheathed his swords, and John nodded in approval. Renee had gotten up as the medic in her platoon checked her wounds.

"I'm fine. Milo?" Renee asked as Milo wobbled towards them.

"I'm up; nearly shit my BDUs, but I'm up" Milo said sheepishly. Renee had a powder poured over the wound that almost instantly clotted the blood, and then received some surgical glue to close the wound and a bandage.

"You're sister would never let me live it down if I let you die" Renee told him.

"Pfft, bad luck, and she knows what happens in war. She'd understand. Besides, I'm a Gripen. We don't die remember?" Milo told her with a chuckle and a small smirk.

"That has been proven time and again by your family. Are you sure you guys aren't Spartans?" Fred asked through his helmet's speakers.

"Shit, you never know! I could be one of you Spartan IIIs! Hey, where's my kick ass powered armor?" Milo said laughing. The Spartans all let out a small chuckle.

"Inbound, supply drop topside" they all heard over the coms. They let two other platoons come to relieve them at the new chokepoint inside the tunnel and headed back up for more ammunition. Milo picked his rocket launcher back up and holstered it over his backpack, with no spare rockets to reload it.

As they reached the surface, a wave of pelicans landed along with a few Albatross transports with full loads of HAMMER drones.

"What's with theâ€¦ hey, that's quite a few of those things. They send everything but the kitchen sink down here?" Buck asked curiously.

"General's orders. They're going to reinforce the defensive line in case the enemy try and come down" a pilot said as he stepped off the ramp as a tech walked up with a control pad and started to roll each drone off its packing pallet. The marines started to see it wasn't just a few drones, but almost every HAMMER drone still operational in the fleet being brought down.

"No aerals?" Dutch asked.

"No air forces now, all of them have been called back up excluding Hornets and Hawks" Jack suddenly said behind them as he tugged on his flight suit's collar. The marines all looked at each other.

"Not like you need it down the tunnels grunts" Jack smirked. They all nodded. He had the Spartans assist him removing defensive barricades and riot shields from his pelican as other marines wheeled them down and into the tunnel depths, setting them up facing out, not in.

"Tunnel 2-8 is clear" they all heard over the coms, and the marines cheered. The last tunnel was officially empty of all enemy troops. There were no more Precursors in the tunnels, but that didn't mean they weren't hiding small squads out in the forests and mountains. It did mean that they weren't watching their backs all the time now.

"Finally, a little time to sit down" Mickey sighed in relief as the ODSs took a seat and took their helmets off, Rookie leaning against the tunnel wall and slowly fading out of consciousness.

"Hey hey hey! Check your kit before you doze off boys! Remember your training!" Buck snapped at his squad in annoyance. They grumbled something incoherent and picked up their rifles, checking parts and muzzles for junk and replacing magazines with fresh ones. Romeo checked his scope for accuracy as Dutch slapped his Spartan Laser into a charging system that was recently flown in. There was only one in the small make shift camp, and it was on a first come first serve basis depending on the squads not fighting in the tunnels. It could

carry three of the Lasers in the lock couplings, but the charging was slow, taking two hours per twenty percent of energy.

"Wonder how it's going up above" Dutch asked the others. Rookie shrugged as he checked his helmet, and Renee shook her head slowly.

"Hopefully better than how it's going down here" she said quietly.

(Author's Note: So yeah; it's been kind of hard to get time to finish my chapters, but I'm getting there! A lot slower than I previously was doing it (every night practically compared to now once a month almost. Sorry) and been getting new ideas here and there for the next chapters so that's playing with how I want this to end later on (This will not be a Mass Effect 3 endingâ€¦ I hopeâ€¦ \*runs away\*))

### 23. Stonewall

\*\*[0300 hours, July 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth had disappeared into the 2nd R&D lab while Elena continued to gain reports of supplies, casualties, repairs and other needs of the fleet. She checked in on Raven Squadron twice in the past four hours, despite the fact they were trying to get some shut eye while they could. Aldric was always the one intercepting the calls for the others, doing his utmost to look out for them. She knew that even though Colonel Falken was commanding the wing; that Aldric was keeping her pilots updated in taken care of.

Elena rubbed the bridge of her nose and got up from her chair as she now realized she was bleary eyed from the lack of sleep. She had barely moved for the past few hours and had to get some rest.

"Gripen calling 2nd R&D lab" she spoke to the air as the coms picked up her voice and transmitted her request to the room she wanted to speak to.

"This is Serina; sorry Agent Franklin can't talk right now General; do you need me to relay a message?" Serina suddenly spoke up. Elena felt surprised that he was still in the pod.

"Um, no, whaâ€¦ is he still working on the sabotage of the enemy fleet?" she asked with a mild case of shock.

"Aaron and he are both being very careful with the effort they are putting into damaging the systems. It is very delicate work for them to not be noticed. Heâ€¦ I believe he just authorized a progression chart to be provided to you should you wish to peruse the effects their actions will cause, and the efficacy of the enemy fleet once they come for us." Elena blinked and rubbed her right eyelid as she yawned.

"Will he be finished soon or is he pulling an all nighter?" Elena asked.

"I'll ask" Serina told her. Elena wondered why he didn't just speak

to her directly as he was capable of transporting right next to her, or speak from his position. Was the work he was doing that complex that he barely had time to speak to her directly?

"He'll be finished with the squadron of fighters in one hour, and then he will be at your quarters right after" Serina responded a minute later.

"Alright. Well, transfer the chart to my terminal in our quarters and I'll read it once I reach there" Elena told her as she walked out of her office.

"Understood. It has been transferred. Sleep well ma'am" Serina told her.

"Thank you Serina" Elena replied as she unbuttoned the top notch of her uniform and unzipped the first two inches down. Two marines walked by and saluted her as she made her way to deck two, and then finally to her quarters. She slipped inside and proceeded to get undressed as she turned her terminal on and checked on the effort Seth had put into sabotaging the enemy forces. His efforts seemed small from what she was able to see, as the malfunctions he was trying to work into the fighters and ships seemed incredibly complex and incredibly time consuming.

Of the now one hundred ships and three hundred fighters in the now finished fleet, only seventy five fighters were sabotaged, as well as ten destroyers, or what seemed to be destroyers. She had no idea what they considered a destroyer hull size, and they might even consider the UNSC cruisers to be frigates. The size scale was skewed in the enemy's favor. Seth did provide a list of all of the ships however, and marked the weapons they had with the information Tachi dug up in the Precursor download.

Elena took a deep breath and got ready for bed, and just as she settled under the covers the door opened with Seth shambling in. He looked as exhausted as she did.

"Hey" he said quietly as he kicked off his shoes and took off his shirt, his lean muscles rippled as he unbuttoned his pants and pulled them off along with his socks.

"Hey" she replied and crawled across the bed to hug him from behind.

"Long day for both of us huh?" he asked as he looked over his shoulder into her eyes.

"Long? What? There has not been enough time to do anything. We need more to set up. Zeks sent an estimation of retrofitting the ARGUS drones. We'll be lucky if they can get all of them equipped with an ion thruster by the time they get here. All crews are desperately trying to finish the last repairs, and the Fording Through Darkness still has a full complement of vehicles and drones that we haven't been able to get out because of the cold shut down of all power" she told him.

"Alright, alright, so short day. Sorry, just feels like a long day for me" he responded with a smirk and then yawned.

"I saw the chart you provided. A quarter of the fighters will be doing what exactly?" she asked him as he crawled into bed as she moved back under the covers.

"Well, pretty much anything we could do to make them stop functioning. We glitched signal repeaters so command signals couldn't be accepted, cracked heat sinks and damaged engines, doubled up energy transfer to weapons-" he told her, and realized the last one sounded as if he was helping the enemy by the look in her eyes.

"Beam weapons tend to have a set balance of just how much they can emit. Go over that, and you can have meltdowns when they try and fire. Most of those sci fi movies you see where someone says "we need more power to the weapons!" is just bullshitting usually. There is only so much power a lens can take before it cracks or distorts. Projectile weapons it is an entirely different story; however they don't exactly use many of those, which is in our favor. Let's just say a lot of lenses will warp in a very short amount of time" he explained as he hit his pillow two times and laid his head down on it.

Elena opened her mouth in an ah expression, understanding what he meant now, and slid next to him with her arm draped over his chest.

"How are the grunts doing down below? I had a chance to see how they are doing once, but that wasâ€¦ hell, five hours ago" he told her as he closed his eyes.

"All tunnels are cleared, and aside from unknown hostiles that have gone dark in the nearby topo outside, they're in relative safety. About damn time that battle ended" she told him as she closed her own eyes and pressed her cheek to his shoulder.

"Good; they deserve to get some rest after that hell they were in" he told her as he slowly fell asleep. She soon followed.

**\*\*[Five Hours Later]\*\***

Seth cracked his eyelids open at the sound of the door being rung from outside, as Elena tried to hide her head under his arm and use it to block the noise.

"Whoever it is, tell them to go away" she mumbled as she tried to hide from the offending noise. Seth slowly got out of the bed and wobbled to the door, nearly tripping on his own shoes in doing so. He opened the door to find Captain Dare standing there. She glanced up and down quickly, and his brain grudgingly allowed some of the cells to come awake enough to let him know he was standing in front of her in just his underwear. She coughed as he really didn't seem to care.

"Sorry to uh, disturb you ma'am, but we seem to have a problem" she said around him towards the living shadow coming up behind as Elena padded across the carpet to see who it was.

"What's wrong Veronica?" the General asked as she rubbed her eyelids trying to get the sleep to fall away.

"The Precursor fleet ma'am. It's moved" Dare told them. Seth looked back at his soon to be wife, and she to him in cold worry.

"Moved where?" Elena asked sternly. She wanted answers.

"Cortana believes to a staging area in the Scutum-Centaurus Arm. Now that they are there, we believe they'll move straight here to attack" Veronica explained. Elena sighed in annoyance as she cocked her head upwards and closed her eyes with her hands on her hips. Seth just took a deep breath and tried to think.

"We don't have a time scale on exactly when they'll be here due to little knowledge of their slip space drives-" Dare started to say, but Seth interjected.

"It doesn't change much in when they'll get here" he told her. Elena looked at him with a hint of curiosity in her eyes.

"Their drives are advanced, but trying to go through the center of any galaxy is a bad idea. They won't attack immediately. I've got a feeling they're waiting for something" he told them. Elena and Veronica both shared a look of confusion.

"Care to enlighten us on what you believe their waiting for?" Dare asked. Seth sighed and walked back into the room and picked up a data pad.

"Serina, we still have RVs out there right now?" he asked to the air.

"Yes we do. Neena as well as Thomas. Do you need a report from them?" Serina asked as her avatar popped up on the data pad.

"Yes please" he replied and waited for the remote viewers under his authority to talk into his bone mic.

"Transfer to the data pad please; I have two others that will probably need the information as well. I'm giving temporary authorization. Just keep any beyond classified items out of the report" he said and the small speakers turned on in the hand held.

"Recon flotilla heading to the shipyard as we speak. They can't get it to activate, which makes us believe either the beacon is the only thing that can control it, orâ€¦" Neena spoke over the pad's speakers. Her voice was low and soft.

"Or they're waiting for the one that has authorization over the shipyard to be brought in. Any inbound ships that our Sats have picked up? We've shot probes out right?" Seth asked.

"Even better. Julian and Taggart have been watching the rim for some time now. One ship, large, size of a Forerunner Dreadnought" Thomas told them and brought up a picture on the data pad.

"ETA?" Elena asked.

"Same time frame it looks. I'd say whoever has the neural ID attachment to the shipyard is on that ship" Neena told them.



"You have confirmation?" Seth asked.

"Not a verified confirmation, but the movement on board seems to revolve around protecting a specific individual that does not have a high rank from what we've seen." Seth looked between the two women. He wasn't about to tell Elena he was going to get into a mind war with that Precursor very soon to wrest control over the shipyard. Even if they survived the upcoming battle and had the beacon belong to the UNSC, the shipyard wouldn't activate with a dominant neural link to it from its owner.

Seth thanked the two RVs for their information, and the com link turned off on the data pad.

"They need to speak through normal coms?" Elena whispered into his ear.

"They could have spoken out loud, but it would have taken some energy to produce the effect, and we need them out there as long as possible in rotating reconnaissance shifts" he explained in another whisper.

"Need to know?" Dare asked. They both shook their head, answering the question as a no. She realized that the information was classified.

"Well that is definitely a change, but still gives us the same time to get ready. Thank you for the update" Elena said with a nod, and Dare saluted her. The Captain walked away after she finished the salute and Elena closed the door. They both got right back into bed with hundreds of thoughts running through their heads, and slowly went back to sleep.

\*\*[1100 hours, July 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Elena woke up to an empty bed. She was normally the one who got ready for the day before even Seth thought about leaving his slumber. She sat up and looked around. Seth was nowhere to be seen. Her terminal was off, which was strange. She thought she smelled smoke. As she got up and walked towards the door, she thought she could feel wet patches on the ground.

Elena looked down below her feet slowly and saw immediately that it was blood. Her eyes widened as she ran to the door and opened it. What she saw behind it was horrifying. There, standing stooped under the ceiling of deck two, was a Precursor, with its tail spine impaled through the chest of the body of Seth. He was lifeless and just hanging there. Multiple other bodies of marines were lying around on the ground as the Precursor looked down at her. Below one of his massive feet was the body of a Spartan with one of its arms missing.

Elena screamed and woke up. Seth nearly fell out of bed from the scream and was already in a crouch to defend himself, his sidearm in hand aiming at the door. He looked at her with wide eyes, wondering what was wrong, and put the gun away.

"Hey, hey, are you ok?" he asked still in defense mode. She took deep breaths as she looked around. Her terminal was in screensaver mode

with the little jets flitting around, and Seth was nearby, albeit scared out of his wits by her abrupt awakening and scream. She nodded slowly as sweat glistened over her body and nearly soaked through the tank top she was wearing.

"Hey, it was just a nightmare ok? Don't worry" he told her as he climbed onto the bed and tried to put his arm around her. She declined the effort by getting up and walking over to the closet to grab a new pair of underwear and bra, as well as a shirt. She then walked into the bathroom and took a quick shower to wash the sweat away. Once she was finished, she walked back out and climbed back into bed, with Seth looking confused.

"It was just a bad dream, I'm fine. Just worried about what's going to happen that's all" she told him quietly, not able to meet his gaze.

"We'll win. We've been planning our asses off hon. We'll be alright" he told her, as she now accepted him putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Still, it seems likely that it's going to be a hard fought victory. A lot of us aren't coming back from this" Elena replied as she sighed and pushed her bangs out of her eyes and over her ears, still somewhat damp from the shower.

"Yeah, we're going to have a high casualty rate. We aren't going to be casualties though, do you hear me? We're making it out of this. Don't ever-" he started to give her a leadership speech, to bring up her confidence, but was cut off with a coms call.

"Seth, this is Serina, are you awake?" the female AI said from thin air.

"Wha, yeah, go ahead" he said, cut off midsentence as Elena looked up at the ceiling, instinctively expecting to see something that the voice attached to.

"The Armada of Unrequited Loyalty has apparently just found the Precursor fleet on long distance sensors. They still won't be able to engage as they are still too far away, but they will arrive almost at the same time the enemy fleet engage us, hell, they might get here faster considering they're slingshotting around the horizon of a micro singularity" Serina told him.

"Wait, singularity?" Elena asked in confusion and looked at Seth.

"Some of the new forerunner tech Skunk Works has been working on explains a bit about how forerunner fleets could move around so quickly. You know how Spartan shields work correct? Well, apparently, Forerunners could use it to condense gravity nearby, which is probably how they used hard light. We still can't produce that effect, but we can make a miniature black hole for maybe a few microseconds, pulsing it out to speed up an entry into slip space, moving along in slip space, and assisting in deceleration. It's probably nowhere near the Precursor tech considering these guys can travel across the galaxy, but considering not even they would screw with a full blown black hole, it can help. I had the intel sent to the Sangheili as an alliance swap" he explained. She blinked at him

with a wry smile. He smirked for a second and looked up at the ceiling.

"Okâ€¦ tell them to hold off until they do. We can catch them in a flanking maneuver" Elena interrupted. Seth looked over at her.

"Trust me, all of us bunched up together doesn't give much room to maneuver. If they have to attack two different sides then it improves our chances. The more they have to move to attack gives us that many more chances to get closer without incoming fire for both the Armada and us" Elena explained. Seth nodded in agreement. He didn't really have the tactical training that she had for a large scale battle. He was far more used to small teams with limited resources completing an assignment with no notice of the forces, and little to no loss of life.

"It seems you've already got a plan set up" he said in a matter of fact tone. She smiled and winked at him.

"Think outside the box. We just have to adapt and counter" she told him as she got up, now fully awake and went to fully dry her hair. She was no longer tired, and in her "zone" with her brain running hundreds of different ways to beat the odds. Even outside of her fighter, she was going to even the odds in any way she could so the fleet came out on top, and they got to go home safely.

Elena grabbed her blow dryer and turned it on, as she took her hair brush and made sure her long black hair was dry and untangled. Seth got undressed and into the shower as they talked to each other, about different ways to counter the Precursor fleet. Elena had more tactical know how, but Seth had unseen abilities that could provide a buffer against the enemy. Seth turned off the shower and grabbed his towel, and then dried his hair and face as he looked at her brushing her teeth.

"Ok, phase one, they slip space in. Chances are their slip space is gonna be close. They're right on top of us, and head straight towards the planet. I pull the switch and turn all the work we've done in sabotaging the enemy ships in a fireworks display" He starts to tell her.

"We have the ARGUS drones in clouds near the battleships, and each battleship at different points throughout the fleet. That should help with an early warning system, and once the fleet malfunctions and throws them in disarray, can provide more support. There will be spare clouds of EYE drones ready to ram and detonate against the Precursor drone fighters" Elena countered.

"Alright, so the enemy is spotted, and we've dealt the first blow. ARGUS drones immediately engage, though chances are they'll get torn apart. That's expected, they're just for harassment damage and a distraction. There are mines outside correct?" Seth asked.

"Yes. You thinking of throwing them around?" Elena asked with a small smirk crossing her lips as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"That's one way of putting it. I'll turn them into highly maneuverable missiles without an engine. Also, just because we didn't

fix up those wrecks outside doesn't mean I can't use them as physical shields or battering rams. Should help lower the damage we take" he explained.

"Good. Alright, so the enemy is engaged, and they're trying to drop off ground forces. I'll lead the fighters out to finish off-" she continued, but Seth's face sunk as she started to explain that she, a General and his fiancée, was going out in a fighter to fight the enemy.

"Don't give me that look, I'm a pilot damn it, and we've already got our backs against the wall. Leaders have sat back in the past and still died, and I am at least going to go down fighting, not holed up in a carrier waiting for some super advanced alien race to cut it in half. At least with a Black Blade I can do some damage and conceal myself alright?" she snapped at him as she wagged a finger in his face. He put up his hands in submission, agreeing with her.

"Alright, alright, fine. Now, fighters are engaged. One giant cloud of little craft attacking. That's a lot of stuff moving around, and definitely going to be difficult to handle on your own as you're outnumbered." Elena looked up at the ceiling thinking.

"Cortana" she said out loud, and the little AI suddenly popped up through the holo dais in the bedroom.

"Yes ma'am?" she asked as her bob of hair moved a bit.

"I know you won't be able to get your chance to throw around Sangheili cruisers, but I need to ask this. Are all of the docking bays empty on those ships?" she asked with a wry smile.

"No they aren't" oh. I see what you're asking" Cortana replied with her own smile.

"You may just get your chance to stop being bored. Let the rest of the AIs in the fleet know to hack the Phantoms, Seraphs and Spirits. Doesn't matter if they get shot down, we just need diversions, spare weapons taking on the enemy, anything that will keep them off our tails" Elena ordered.

"Yes ma'am. I've just alerted them. The elites have provided us with the access codes however General. We don't need to crack any security features" Cortana quipped.

"Even better. Let me know once all of the craft are out" Elena said, and Cortana nodded and disappeared.

"Ok, spare fighters, mostly used to allow manned fighters time to pull back, repair and rearm, and a chance to regain their wits. Enemy main fleet is still moving. Armada of Unrequited Loyalty gates in, flanking attack, guns blazing" Seth continues.

"Perfect. We attack from the side now or turning around, while the Sangheili attack from the other side. Cross fire. Ground forces are temporarily on their own. Beyond that" Elena trailed off.

"We don't really have much beyond that. That's still quite an improvement over what we started with" Seth said with a chuckle as

she spit the foam from her mouth and gargled some mouth wash. She spit it out as well, and wiped her mouth, as Seth picked up his own tooth brush. She blew a wisp of her breath into his face and smiled.

"Minty" he responded and started brushing his teeth. He spit out the foam and gargled his own mouth wash as Elena leaned against the edge of the sink thinking.

"I have a plan in motion just in case things don't go so well" she told him suddenly. He looked over at her as he pulled on his clothes.

"What sort of plan?" he asked with a hint of suspicion.

"If nothing works to stop them, there's going to be a set of NOVA bombs in key locations away from the fleet as a last ditch strike. We'll take out the whole area to stop them" she explained quietly. He was silent for a moment looking her over.

"This doesn't involve you doing anything does it?" he asked.

"No, no. The idea is that you could detonate them remotely without a timer. It would stop them from interfering with the bombs and allow us to safely get away" she replied, and he sighed in relief. She looked over at him with a small smile and then leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I intend on coming back from this one. I will not have a repeat of what happened at Deliverance. But you said it yourself, this is bigger than you or me. We have to make sure they don't get the beacon" she told him. He nodded without thinking but said nothing. She walked into the bedroom and sat down on the bed to put on her shoes, as he did the same. Once they were fully dressed, they gave each other a quick kiss and left in different directions to continue their work. Seth went back to throwing a monkey wrench in the enemy equipment, while Elena continued overseeing the retrofit of their equipment to handle the enemy forces. Dr. Wright and Cortana both poured over any tactical information that science teams had uncovered from the Forerunner installations found to give them some edge as Tachi tried to figure out design plans for enemy ships. Cortana's slip space calculations allowed them to pinpoint slip space exit coordinates with their sensors, allowing a few more minutes of advanced warning.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

The marines were moving like they had a purpose. Turrets were being set up at both tunnel entrances alongside HAMMER drones and fortifications. Riot shields were being issued out, for little good they would do. They would most likely stop a soldier from being blown to pieces and instead just lose an arm or leg. They'd survive from the plasma weaponry, but the linear induction weapons were another story. Even the Spartans could only take one shot before their shields went down.

"This is bullshit. We fight in, now we have to hold this location while the enemy sends reinforcements? We barely contained the last battle. How do they expect us to do it this time?" Romeo grumbled as he pulled out the Spartan Laser from the charging coupling and handed

it to Dutch, and then continued to check his scope on his rifle.

"I just work here Romeo, if you want an answer to that question, you'd have to ask the higher ups. You know as well as I do that's a bad idea to question orders" Buck replied as he checked his helmet and com unit.

"Yeah? Well it still sounds like a stupid plan. Can't we put a nuke in here and leave? I swear, it's probably that Admiral that thought this one up." Buck turned around at the sound of another pair of feet, and saw that it was Fred walking by.

"Actually the orders were given by General Gripen" he told them as he went to a crate of grenades and pulled out four. The ODSs looked at each other.

"You serious? She thought this one up? Well then, guess it might work then. Still a crazy plan though" Buck said as he turned on his heel and grabbed his MA5C.

"It'll work" Fred replied as he walked away from the squad of Helljumpers.

"This is Eagle 1-1, last run complete. Heading back up" They all heard over the coms.

"Eagle 2-1 following. Good luck down there guys and gals" another voice said. Buck walked out of the mouth of the tunnel and looked up. He saw two small dots heading upwards, the last two fighters providing air support against hidden squads of Precursors in the mountains and forest nearby. Hornets and Hawks were already patrolling the area in the distance, and even a few Falcons were moving around with marines at the turrets. A scorpion rolled around nearby, turned around the opposite side of the tunnel, and disappeared to a new location. Two warthogs shot after it, providing escort.

Buck knew that the next few days were going to be long and hard and gruesome.

\*\*[2300 hours, July 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Elena walked with a data pad slowly back towards her quarters. She was exhausted yet again. She personally helped Ezekiel and the other techs replace the thruster nacelles on the ARGUS drones, which surprised the engineers nearby, and gave them new found respect for the General. She was so tired of looking at reports that she needed a break to do some "real work" in her eyes. The fleet was now looking to her for guidance, but they were pretty much doing everything without her interfering with their day to day, and she was Air Force; she knew about fast moving craft, not lumbering starships. There was a reason the Navy and Air Force were still two separate entities. Even though the Navy did have its wings of fighters, the Air Force consistently showed off with their own skill in both atmospheric engagements as well as vacuum. Over the past hundred years, the Air Force had proven it wasn't just the land based cousin of the Navy. The Military branch was notorious throughout the Human-Covenant War at producing some of the best pilots, and some of the worst, in history.

Elena still thought Aldric and Jones were damned good however.

As she headed around the corner from the lift, she spotted Sarah talking with Dr. Wright.

"Once we get back, I'll finalize the paperwork. Don't worry my dear, you'll be fine with the enhancements" Daveth said as he tried to give a reassuring smile to the young Captain.

"Iâ€ guessâ€" she responded quietly, still a bit uneasy with what he had suggested. Dr. Wright patted her on the shoulder and walked off, not noticing Elena in the distance. The General walked up as Sarah turned her head to look at her.

"Oh! Ma'am!" Sarah sputtered out quickly and saluted.

"At ease. Enhancements?" Elena asked curiously as she cocked an eyebrow to the receding male form and then looked back to Sarah.

"Oh, umâ€ Dr. Wright offered a chance to have similar enhancements toâ€ well, you. I don't have the same genetic makeup so I can't have the same amount of things changed like you did, but stillâ€ if it'll make me a better pilotâ€ and he recently was provided the funding for another pilot to undergo the augmentation process. Iâ€ don't know why he would ask me, I don't know if I deserve itâ€" she explained quietly, slightly wincing as she gave Elena the info, as if thinking the young General would be angry at the turn of events and lash out at her.

"Are you sure you want them to be implemented? They will take some getting used to, and it isn't like the flip of a switch and you're suddenly better. It took me half a year just to recover from the experiment, and get myself back up to my original sim pod scores before I could even think of improving upon them Sarah. The effects, however, were worth it" Elena asked, telling her about her ordeal with the changes to her body. She looked down at her own hand and clinched her fingers into a fist and then relaxed, remembering the MYOMER nano wires placed throughout her muscles and ligaments.

"Will itâ€ will it hurt?" Sarah asked, and Elena looked up at her face to find a look of pure worry and hesitation. Sarah had a past unlike anything Elena could understand; it was only natural for her to fear feeling the pain.

"They'll keep you sedated for the worst of it, and provide pain medication after to make sure you're comfortable. Which of the augmentations were you compatible with?" Elena asked. Sarah fidgeted a bit, and looked around.

"Umâ€ let's seeâ€" she started to say, and pulled up the information on her own data pad "Haptic Neural Interface, Occipital Capillary Reversal, and Superconducting Fibrification of Neural Dendritesâ€" she told her. Elena raised her eyebrows and nodded knowingly.

"Dr. Wright also said something aboutâ€ um, working on having the MYOMER strands no longer require a gene makeup connection. I won't know if that will be another one to add to the listâ€ until we get

back" Sarah trailed off.

"We'll get back, trust me" Elena replied quickly and put her hand on Sarah's shoulder. Sarah looked up at her superior's face as the young General tried to give her a reassuring smile.

"I'm nervous. I hope we make it through this. I don't want to die, but well" she took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a second, and straightened up "I know we'll survive this. We can survive this" she said, trying to put on a professional can do attitude.

"Yup. We've come too far, and these guys have been having a run of the farm for the past few fights. About time to give some back" Elena gave her a thumbs up and a wink. Sarah nodded and smiled, and then saluted her friend. Elena saluted back, and noticed Aldric turn the corner further down the hall. Sarah turned around and saw him, and then looked back at Elena.

"Go on Sarah, get some sleep" Elena told the blonde haired pilot. She nodded in response and walked to Aldric, who in turn saluted the General and hugged Sarah. The meek pilot said a few things to him, and he responded, but then she nodded and walked off without him.

Aldric walked up to Elena and stood at attention.

"Ma'am, could I speak to you for a moment involving a personal matter?" he asked. Elena really wanted to get some sleep, but she also couldn't ignore her pilots if they needed some consultation.

"Of course, you know my door is always open" she replied as she walked to her quarters and keyed her fingerprint and voice recognition to get in. She motioned for him to follow as she dropped her data pad on her small desk in the corner. She plopped down on her bed and looked up at the Commander, motioning for him to sit.

"Thank you" he responded and sat at her desk.

"What's the problem?" she asked listening to his personal request.

"It's involving the upcoming fight ma'am. Permission to speak freely?" he started to say, and tried to relax, but his mind was racing for the right words. She nodded, giving him the go ahead.

"Are you afraid? I know the odds don't look like they're in our favor, but I believe we have a pretty good chance with the plan set in motion" she told him.

"I understand that, it's just that ugh, how should I say this my past is classified as for all Spartans ma'am" he told her. She didn't get what he was trying to say.

"My parents were killed when I was younger in a gang drive by. Seems things like that will never go away on Earth" he started to tell her.



"Where was it?" she asked quietly.

"Seattle, Washington. They never saw it coming. I got pushed through foster homes due to me being, what, I think I was seven or eight? Too old for most adoptions" he continued.

"I'm sorry to hear that Aldric" she said softly.

"Yeah, well, sob story continues, at age eighteen we get shoved out into the world whether we were good at school or not. Foster families don't exactly try and help you get into a university, so I joined up at a military recruitment station. I figured I could try and be a pilot for the Navy, or something, get some credits to save my butt. Turns out the screening process checked over my DNA, physical requirements and aptitude for "reaction to aerospace vehicles." I guess that meant I was good at the sim pod. Anyways, long story short, made into a Spartan, and the rest got buried" he finished.

"And soâ€¦ your personal problem is, what exactly?" Elena asked confused.

"Well, in the event that a soldier is KIA, all payment goes to family, but due to me not having any family to speak of, the amount of credits I have saved up would be shoveled right back into the UEG" he started to tell her.

"You aren't dying Aldric. We're all getting out of this. Spartans don't die remember?" she told him, remembering the old saying from the Human-Covenant War, to boost morale. He chuckled and closed his eyes.

"I'm still human Elena. We bleed just like anyone else, the Precursors have proven that. Hell, the Covenant proved that. That was just to ease the public's worry about how the Covenant was beating our asses into the ground. Now, the personal request I have is on this pad-" he started to say as he pulled out a data pad from his pocket and reached over to hand it to her "-and it explains it all."

Elena read through the contract that was written up, her eyes going wide in surprise a few times.

"It's aâ€¦ willâ€¦ you want Sarah to be a beneficiary in the event you're considered KIA?" she stated softly and looked up at him. He couldn't meet her gaze.

"She deserves a lot more than the crap she's always gotten. Her past, her training, her personality. This war could break her. Hell, she should be going through a full psyche eval right now. She's a good pilot, but the way things are turning outâ€¦ if, and I'm not saying I'll make it easy, I am KIAâ€¦ I need the credits I've saved up to go to her as well as anything she needs. The request needs authorization from a superior officer due to the military nature, and wellâ€¦ I sure as hell can't see Colonel Falken doing it" he told her. She realized he was serious about this.

"Aldricâ€¦ this is, I meanâ€¦ what is with this view everyone seems to be having onboard this ship? Is everybody that demoralized and thinking we aren't gonna make it out of this?" she asked. The Spartan

couldn't respond for a few seconds, trying to dredge up the words.

"I got some under the table intel from Captain Dare. The Precursor fleet is one hundred ships with three hundred fighters and one dreadnought. You know as well as I do that our carved up fleet can barely limp right now, and we are shooting spit wads while they're hitting us with death rays. We can't even run right now without a slip space drive" he told her. She sighed and brought her hand up to her forehead with her eyes closed.

"Our chances of surviving this one are pretty slim aren't they?" Aldric asked softly. She looked up at him, a member of her Raven Squadron. She nodded in agreement.

"All of this work we've been doing is the only reason we might have a chance, and even then, a lot of us won't make it out of this one alive" she replied.

"Then I formally request you sign that contract in the event I'm one of them. I need to know that she'll be taken care of, if it happens" he said. She looked down at the spot waiting for her signature on the data pad. She pulled a stylus from the side and moved gracefully with her hand, her penmanship showing the curves and lines of a dancer in her name. She felt like she was signing the life away of her friend, proving that he could die. She hadn't lost a single life in the 988th Tactical Wing, or from her personal squadron, but now it felt as if she had just opened the door for bad luck.

"Alright, it's done" she stated quietly and handed back the data pad.

"Thank you ma'am" he said and stood up, snapped to and saluted her.

"But let me give you one warning. Just because I signed that doesn't give you the right to relax and not fight to survive you hear me? I will not let I cannot have one of my squadron not make it back home she'd never forgive me you know that? So you fight just as hard as anyone else to keep going" she told him sternly, a fire in her eyes as she stared him down. He nodded. Due to him being in her quarters for personal reasons and they were both not on duty, she gave him a friendly hug and let him leave to go see Sarah.

Seth walked up to the door just as Aldric was leaving, and the Commander nodded to him. Seth looked at his back with curiosity as the Spartan walked down the hallway with a purpose to see someone. He then walked into their quarters to see Elena standing there.

"He just came on a personal matter. He's gonna go see Sarah now" she told him. He shrugged, not really caring so much as to why he was there, more as to why the Commander was not getting some rest. He dropped his data pad on the bed and put his side arm in the drawer of the night stand and started to get undressed, not saying a word. Elena started to think he was annoyed with her having Aldric in their quarters.

"It really was just a personal matter involving Sarah and him" she spoke up, and he came out of his thoughts and looked over at

her.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure, it's no problem. Just mulling some things over" he told her.

"About what?" she asked as she started to get ready for bed.

"Nothing, don't worry about it, you've got more pressing things to figure out hon" he told her with a small smile. She knew now that something was working its way under his skin.

"Come on, tell me" she said as he sat down on the bed and she came up behind him, putting her arms over his shoulder and leaning her chin on one of his muscled shoulder blades.

"You'd never forgive me if I told you I was thinking about it instead of getting out of here alive" he chuckled and shook his head slightly.

"Oh just spit it out" she giggled and playfully tried to shake him with her arms draped.

"Tomorrow is my birthday" he finally said. Her mouth opened in slight surprise as she just realized she didn't have a present for him. Considering the circumstances, the best present she could give would be to get everyone home in one piece.

"Whaâ€¦ well, we need to somehow fix that-" she started to say, but he looked over his should and put his hands over hers.

"No we don't, it's at the bottom of the list. I've ignored my birthdays for the past five years Elena, another won't change that" he told her quietly and squeezed her hands softly.

"You might ignore them, but I sure don't want to. It's a day I like thank you very much. It's a reminder that you're hereâ€¦ with me" she told him and kissed his cheek.

"Maybe when all of this is over, have a belated dinner or something" he told her as she leaned her head against his back.

"Uh uh, we can get Amber and Marcus in on it too, even Andy. I want the cops to try and break the party up" she told him with a wry smile.

"You want the cops to come and break the party up? Wow, just how big do you want it to be?" he asked as he turned around and helped her pull back the covers to slide into bed.

"As big as it's needed. I wouldn't be here without you. I'd be stuck in some pod somewhere, my brain wired up controlling alien fighters and killing UNSC pilots if it wasn't for you. I'd have drunk myself into liver failure involving Andy even if you didn't find me. You don't give yourself enough credit Seth. You need to celebrate your birthday" she said softly, and kissed him on his lips.

"It'll have to wait until after we're through this, but yeah, you've made your point" he chuckled as she nodded at his agreement. They both fell asleep quickly, trying to get their minds off all of the

preparations they were making.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Buck leaned against the wall of the tunnel, the unpacked cot and sleeping bag laid under him. His gear was latched in a small footlocker nearby. The small camp was right next to the control room, with a makeshift shower stall set up nearby and small card table to whittle away the time. The marines and Spartans had set up all the defenses they had at their disposal, with the remainder being worked on by engineers. Buck had a new found respect for Corporal Milo, as the man had assisted in setting up smaller minefields near the mouth of the tunnels. He later found out that Milo had been trained for artillery spotting and air strike communications, but also for bomb disposal and munitions control. He seemed to have a knack for explosives.

The sergeant looked around, seeing the rest of his squad trying to sleep or playing poker. Dutch was staring at a picture of his wife, while Mickey and Romeo kept losing at the card game. The Rookie was already out like a light. Despite everything happening, Buck wished he could be up above with Veronica.

He got up and walked to a nearby communications terminal set up and activated it, and keyed in his ID and tried to connect to Captain Dare's quarters. There were ten rings before she picked up.

"Hello?" she said groggily. He must have woken her up.

"Hey Veronica, sorry to wake you, I didn't mean to do it. I'll let you rest" he said softly.

"Huh? Buck? Shit, you know what time it is right? You couldn't have called at a better time? Earlier perhaps?" she asked annoyed, but still barely registering the conversation.

"Sorry, guess my timing was always off huh?" he said half chuckling before trailing off.

"Well I'm awake now. It's not like calling later will change anything. Did you need something down there?" she asked squinting at the terminal. She looked disheveled. He knew she was a restless sleeper, moving around in the bed with her blonde hair strewn about. It was cute to him, like a cat trying to take up as much space to relax as it could without its owner kicking it off the bed.

"No no, I justâ€¦ I wanted to hear your voice that's all" he said softly. She seemed a bit confused, then it struck her as her brain registered what he just said.

"Eddyâ€¦ now's not the time to go all soft ok? We've got a job to do" she told him as she slapped the top of her pillow softly.

"Sorry, won't happen again ma'am" he said, realizing she needed what sleep she could. Veronica was probably getting it worse than he was down below, now with the battle over and repairs still underway on the fleet. He could only imagine what Elena was going through.

"Eddy, get some rest okay? I'll see you up here when this is all

over" she told him, a trick of her words letting him know that she was in fact fine with the call.

"Yeah, sure. Hey, sleep well Veronica" he said, squaring his jaw as he looked at her. She always thought she looked hideous after sleeping, but he thought she was beautiful.

"You too Eddy" she replied.

"Love" he said finally, and she squinted for a second in silence. He felt a twang of worry that she wouldn't say it back; that she would end the call on him without returning the same word he just said.

"Love" she replied and turned off the coms.

He sighed in relief and went back to his cot, his dog tags swaying as he sat down. He was feeling like he could sleep now, and flopped down stomach first on the cushy sleeping bag strewn out on the hard cot frame, his right arm drooped over the side. He saw a HAMMER drone wheel away from one side of the camp to the other, with marines parting for it to move. It had the capability to move around them, but given the imposing weaponry it was equipped with, everyone still felt intimidated by it and stepped aside.

Buck slowly closed his eyes to get what rest he could.

\*\*[0700 hours, July 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/  
Scutum-Centaurus Arm, Salvation Colony]\*\*

Seth woke up with a snort as he felt a feminine hand shake him gently. His head was buried under his pillow and didn't see quite what was happening, who was trying to wake him up, and for what reason. He slowly pulled out from his protective cover and looked around, bleary eyed as he realized Elena was sitting next to him dressed.

"What the-" he said as she shoved a small plate with a cupcake in front of his face, with a candle shoved in the top of it.

"We'll get a bigger one when we get back, I promise you on that, but until then, happy birthday hon" she said with a smile as the candle flame flickered slightly. He silently chuckled and with a small smile, he blew the candle out.

"You made a wish I hope" she said with a smirk and a cocked eyebrow.

"I'd tell you about it, but I'm afraid it wouldn't come true, and I'll take what I can get" he said, and she instantly knew he wished for everyone to make it out alive. He hadn't actually told her what he wished for, so hopefully it would come true.

"Just got word that Zeks has finished installing the ion thrusters. They're testing the swarms outside right now. Everything is set up now, we're just waiting on minor repairs for the rest of the fleet" she told him.

"Finally some good news, and on my birthday" Seth said as he rubbed his eyes to get the sleep out and slipped slowly out of bed.

"Where did you get the cupcake anyways?" he asked as he scratched his chest.

"You'd be surprised what the officer's mess can whip up. I could have gotten a full breakfast set up, but I figured you'd want to choose what you'll eat. Besides, my choice of chocolate chip pancakes you may not exactly go gaga over" she smiled at him coyly.

"Chocolate chip? Sheesh, too sweet. Macadamia nut please" he said as he got up and walked to the bathroom. He wasn't going to give her a kiss until he brushed his teeth and used mouth wash. Once he finished, he walked out and gave her a long french kiss.

"Gonna take a bite of your cake?" she asked.

"What flavor?" he asked. She looked in different directions and tried to remember.

"It's a yellow cake, vanilla I think?" she stated carefully. He laughed.

"Sorry, I just told them to make one, didn't really give anything specific" she looked sheepish.

"It's fine, I'm sure it tastes great" he said as she sliced off a piece with the fork and pushed it towards his mouth. He wrapped his lips around the metal and ate the mouthful with a slight amount of frosting poking out of the side of his mouth for a mere moment, and licked that off quickly.

"Yup, vanilla, I think-" he said just as Serina came over the intercom.

"Seth, we have a problem" she told him as Elena looked up.

"Status?" he asked.

"Precursor fleet is moving, they'll be here in two hours" she told him.

"And the Armada?" Elena asked.

"About twenty minutes after, their advantage just disappeared" the AI told her.

"Wonderful" Elena grumbled.

"Ok, this is it" Seth said as the young General looked him in the eyes. They both knew what was going to happen. Seth dressed quickly, not even taking a shower as Elena waited. They both walked to the door to leave.

"Whatever happens, I love you" Seth told her.

"I love you too" she replied and they kissed one last time. She nodded to him as he walked down the hall and towards another lift to get to the lab. Elena walked to another lift and headed down to the hangar bay holding her fighter. As she walked into the changing room and saw other pilots leaving with their suits on, and saw Sarah

sitting on a bench staring at her helmet. Elena quickly got her suit on and grabbed her helmet, and then sat down next to her.

"Scared?" she asked as Sarah looked up at her.

"Yeah" she replied quietly.

"I am too. Just do what we've always done alright? You're fighting for the squadron, and to protect those men and women down below. We aren't going to lose okay? Let's go show them they can't push us around" Elena told her. Sarah nodded in agreement and took a deep breath as they both stood up and walked out. Sarah walked to her fighter and stepped up the stairs as Elena walked over to Ezekiel.

"Everything is prepped; we're as ready as we'll ever be" Ezekiel told her.

"Understood" Elena replied and put her helmet on. The seals clicked and pressurized as she started walking to the stairs of her fighter.

"General Gripen" Ezekiel suddenly spoke out. Elena looked back to see the entire maintenance crew standing with him.

"Whatever happens, it's been an honor serving under you" he said as all of them saluted her. She nodded and stood at attention, saluting them as well.

"And it's been an honor working with you all" she replied and turned on her heel. She walked up the small staircase and slipped into her cockpit, and went through preflight checks. The cockpit closed as the platform moved her into position and sealed the blast doors behind her.

"Raven 1-1 on the rail, ready for burn" she said over coms as she checked over any sensor reports from the Conundrum.

"Raven 1-1, clear for burn, launch in 3,2,1" she heard from the CIC as the rail forced her into her seat for a split second as the G-force was controlled by her suit, her fighter, and the augments she went through, firing from the hangar bay silently into the deep void followed by the rest of her squadron, and the rest of the wings of fighters and gunships. Everything was out and ready to fight, even some tugs. There were pelicans fitted for gunship support escorting the Vultures.

"This is ground force Alpha, we're prepared down here" she heard through battle chatter. The marines were in position once the enemy showed up. They waited for the full hour and a half it took for the enemy to gate out. During that time, the fighters sat in position, softly drifting at times in almost complete silence, with little chatter moving about beyond updates in status. She could easily have accessed private coms and talked to her squadron, or the rest of her wing, but she didn't see the point. Even Seth wasn't responding, and more than likely, quite busy trying to keep an eye on the travel path of the Precursor fleet. She even wondered how it was possible for him to watch in those eleven spare dimensions in slip space, but apparently he was quite able.

"This is overwatch, we've got a connectionâ€¦ energy diffusionâ€¦ here they comeâ€¦" she heard as she knew everyone's heart was jumping into their throat and they were holding their breath. One ship, then another, and another, and suddenly the whole fleet was moving out of their conduits, arriving to destroy the human fleet positioned in front of the planet they were heading towards.

"My godâ€¦" Roberts whispered. Three hundred fighters came out alongside the larger ships and headed towards them.

"\_Engaging gremlin mechanical failures" \_Seth said as suddenly, half of the three hundred enemy fighters started to careen into each other, explode altogether, glitch and lose power and even lose control and go in the opposite direction the command signals were telling the automated systems to go. A good thirty of the enemy ships followed similar events as the fighters, and yet the remainder chugged on, nearing firing range due to their slip space gate out so close to the UNSC fleet.

"Get ready, pull back the fleet while we can, give us some time for those mines to work!" Elena ordered as Seth, and Aaron both grabbed walls of mines and sent them straight towards the enemy ships. Some were shot down, but the hailstorm of explosives started to chew into their numbers slowly, while the UNSC tried to go in reverse, their backs still facing away from the enemy. It took a good ten minutes for the mines to be used up, with Seth and Aaron even grabbing some nukes and trying to squeeze them between the enemy fleet to contain most of the blast.

"Incoming EMP wave! Keep your safety systems primed! Divert all power to shunt the wave!" Elena ordered as her pilots complied, the waves washed over their ships and fighters, doing nothing as they were prepared for the event. The damage the nukes did to the enemy shields was severe, but still couldn't break through their defenses. It did give their ships a fighting chance to try and break through though. Once the mines were expended as were the nukes; the damaged hulks of the 7th fleet as well as the Sangheili were used as large battering rams, though it was a bit more difficult for Seth and Aaron to maneuver them. The enemy opened up on the blocks of engine nacelles and armored frames, melting away panels and blowing apart large chunks of the wrecks, allowing the automated fighters to slip through the holes and continue on.

"They're almost right on top of usâ€¦" Aldric said as he gritted his teeth.

"Holdâ€¦" Elena said quietly.

"\_All junk expended. Us monkeys have no more shit to fling large enough to do damage" \_Seth reported.

"Holdâ€¦" Elena continued as the fighters started to charge their weapons. Seth and Aaron brought up instinctively bose-einstein condensate barriers to protect the UNSC fleet, which impressed every fighter pilot as they saw a light cloud build up in front of them.

"Ma'am! Inbound Armada of Unrequited Loyalty!" Dariah told Dare on the bridge. What they saw was impressive. The armada came out of slip space weapons blazing straight into the oncoming enemy fleet, shields



up and ready to fight.

"Bring in the AI fighters now! All UNSC forces! Engage! Engage!" Elena barked out. A wall of purple Seraphs, Spirits and Phantoms came out from behind the UNSC fleet controlled by the bored AIs stationed on the starships. The armada let loose its own fighters as the Precursor fleet was caught in a pincer attack, but was still moving forward. The destroyed parts of the thrown about wrecks that Seth and Aaron had used as weapons were now small debris used to dive behind when the enemy traded fire with UNSC fighters. Swarms of ARGUS drones dove after enemy fighters, though nowhere near as fast and quickly changed to other targets as they came in range. Strings of EYE drones were rammed straight into Precursor craft as they tried to get a bead on UNSC Sabres.

Beams replied to auto cannon fire as missiles responded to torpedoes. One UNSC frigate, Lasting Fate, lost all shields and its reactor was going critical. The crew sacrificed themselves by ramming the ship straight towards the enemy and detonating the reactor right in the middle of the hostile fleet. The resulting explosion took out four Sabre fighters, but it also significantly damaged three enemy destroyers.

"They're launching transports!" Aldric yelled out as they all noticed incoming craft.

"Track them! They better not be going for the fleet!" Elena snapped as she flipped about mid attack, two of her missiles still finding their marks.

"They're not boarding! They're heading for landfall! Let's hope the ground pounders can hold out!" Roberts said as he trailed off and continued on his attack trajectory towards two fighters who were engaging a squadron of Vultures.

"I hope so too!" Elena whispered as she did a sling shot maneuver around a Precursor destroyer, allowing two fighters to smash into the shields of the large ship while she fired her EMP cannon down the nose of her fighter and right into the opposite side of the ship, knocking its shields out. Merricks followed up with a particle cannon strike, punching into the armor and carving a path across the bow. Merricks followed his squadron leader as they disappeared before the destroyer could return fire, providing hard fast strikes and leaving without the enemy knowing what hit them. They had to maximize their damage and keep them busy enough for the rest of the fleet to finish off damaged enemy forces. They couldn't afford the time to finish off an enemy on their own.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Buck rolled into cover as the first plasma rounds struck. A rail round punched clean through the rock a few feet away and blew a marine back, his right arm missing.

"Shit!" he yelled as hornets and hawks traded fire with Precursor landing craft. Falcons strafed the entrances to the tunnels as tanks constantly opened up when they could. It took an amazing amount of firepower to take even one Precursor down, and in exchange they'd lose tens of soldiers.

"Anybody else glad these fuckers don't have vehicles?" Dutch yelled out as rock exploded nearby him.

"Do you really want those bastards to be driving around in style?" Ash yelled out as he dove out of his destroyed cover and nearly took a rail round to his shields, diving low and rolling into a dug out foxhole.

"They probably couldn't fit them into the tunnels, so they sent down just infantry" if you can call them infantry" Fred replied as he looked over his cover and saw the behemoths coming towards the entrance.

"Buck! Look up!" Mickey yelled out as he pointed towards the sky. He hoped it was some good news. Entering through the atmosphere, were Sangheili drop pods and Phantoms. Four large pods also came down before blowing their cargo locks and releasing their reinforcements. Four, heavily armored Scarabs dropped and landed on the ground, and they were on the UNSC's side. Their heavy mining lasers opened up on the Precursor infantry squads, dropping their shields while hawks and hornets opened up to finish them off. Plasma artillery fire opened up from a nearby ridge, pelting the tunnel entrance forcing the marines to back down the passageway.

"We can't keep this up! We're being shelled into the ground!" Dutch yelled as three rail rounds flew nearby, knocking him off balance and onto his back from the shockwave.

"Shit! There goes a Falcon!" Mickey yelled as one of the half transport, half gunship aircraft spun out of control and fell off into the forest.

"Damn it, we can't get near the wreckage to check for survivors!" Dutch yelled as another volley of plasma struck near the tunnel.

"We need a squad to go out the secondary entranceway and get those men back!" A lieutenant said from a nearby foxhole. They were trading fire as fast as they could reload, with machine gun nests chattering away from their fortified positions.

"We don't know if the Precursors haven't already gotten to the crash site!" another sergeant yelled out. One of the Scarabs lost one of its legs and crashed into the ground, still struggling to stand up and open fire on a landing craft.

"I don't think their focusing on wounded, they're going for the control room!" the lieutenant yelled out, and looked behind him. Marines were trying to get their hits in where they could, but the amount of damage the enemy weapons could produce was incredible. Cover seemed to do little other than hide where their bodies were positioned.

"Sergeant Kilburn! You're up! Get to that crash site through the secondary entrance with your platoon!" the lieutenant ordered. Renee looked at him with bewilderment, and snapped into action with a slight shake of her head.

"Yes sir!" she yelled as the rest of her platoon followed as they got into four warthogs, two with gun platforms and two transports. She took one look back from her passenger seat and saw John firing from

his position, and then turn and look at her. He nodded and gave her a Spartan smile over his visor.

"Good luck, come back safe" he said over a private communication to her.

"Yeah. Hold the fort until we get back" she replied. Milo gunned the engine and the warthog shot out through the second tunnel, not directly under fire. They had soldiers to save.

\*\*[Ten minutes later]\*\*

Elena zipped past an enemy cruiser as it tried to open up on her, with four boxy craft hot on her tail. She barrel rolled and flipped, flying completely in reverse as she aimed, launching a salvo of micro missiles and dropped two aerosol grenades as she came back around and continued on her original path. The cruiser wasn't what she was interested in. She wanted a shot at a battleship nearby.

As she neared the hulking assault ship, large beams erupted from multiple directions, trying to cleave her small fighter in half as she dodged and rolled, continuing forward and unphased. She was cool and collected, and knew just how fast the beams could track. At the last moment, she engaged her active camouflage and photo cell panels and disappeared, only to come straight behind the large ship and fire two remote detonation penetrators straight into the engines. They ignored the shields and burrowed through the armor, punching into two side engines as Elena held off for a few seconds before detonating them and fired a blast from her EMP cannon. The weapon lowered the shields at a specific point near a third engine that a UNSC frigate was aiming at.

The frigate fired a MAC round and punched through the remaining defenses, knocking the third engine off kilter and sending the battleship heading straight towards the cruiser Elena had ignored. The large frame easily smashed through the smaller cruiser and split it in two, as well as dropping the front shields and damaging the armor of the battleship. Two Sangheili cruisers opened up on it with plasma torpedoes and pulse lasers.

"Nice shooting, next target" Elena said as the battleship started to fall apart and no longer return fire. They had been trying to gang up on the large ship for some time, trying to break through the wall of smaller destroyers. Things were getting very difficult to work with as the fighters were being kept under control, but the capital ships were punching holes through the UNSC fleet and Armada of Unrequited Loyalty. They were losing quite a few ships for each Precursor capital ship they took down.

"That dreadnought isn't in the fight ma'am, take a look" Jacobs said as he placed a data marker on his HUD for Elena to track. She zoomed in immediately and noticed the huge ship hadn't moved from where it exited slip space.

"Seth, what's it doing? Wouldn't it be trying to continue with the rest of the fleet to take us out?" she asked to the air. No response.

"Seth? Oh god no!" she asked again, now extremely worried. Again no response from her fiancé.

"He's in the middle of extremely delicate work General Gripen, he'll respond when he can" Serina reported over the coms.

"What? What's heâ€¦ nevermind; at least it cuts out a long range response" she said as she pulled her fighter around for another target, trying to find another hard hitter to sink. Of the hundred ships that came through, thirty were disabled right from the start by Seth, and now they had taken out another thirty with the mines, shipwrecks used as battering rams, and concentrated firepower from the fleet and flanking maneuver of the Sangheili. The enemy was still taking its toll on them. Two more wings were taken out, and four vultures in the 988th Tactical, Elena's wing, were gone. The Sangheili had lost half of their fleet as the space battle raged on, with MAC rounds and plasma torpedoes bombarding the enemy shields while they fired beams and cleaved into UNSC and Sangheili armor.

All of the repairs they had made, all of the advantages they had tried to come up with, was barely allowing them to break even. The fight was turning into pure luck or skill now.

Sarah was heading towards an enemy cruiser with her weapons opening up in all directions, except she didn't see four fighters coming from around the large enemy ship to engage her. She rolled left and dodged one, just barely sliding by it as they flipped back around to open up on her. Two flew right into her mines she had already launched as she dove, with torpedoes locking onto her from the destroyer.

"I've got to engage active camou-" she started to report just as a beam struck her shields and glanced off.

"Active camouflage systems destabilized" the computer stated as she broke off from her attack to try and get away. Her fighter would go through a short automated repair and reboot the stealth systems to allow another try after.

As she disengaged, another squadron of Precursor fighters came launching from the side of the destroyer and tried to intercept her. She now had twelve fighters on her without any backup, or capability to hide. She immediately requested assistance as her auto turrets opened up and her mine dispenser dropped four mines before ringing empty. She dropped four aerosol grenades and four flares to throw off any torpedoes locked onto her.

"Hang on, I'm coming to assist!" Aldric yelled out as a small speck came closer, firing a volley of missiles and lancing the area with his particle cannons. Three Sabres had his back, but one was quickly taken out by a nearby cruiser.

The dogfight became brutal as both Black Blades took numerous hits to their shields, and the two defending Sabres were destroyed. There were only two fighters left, and the destroyer was out of range to continue attacking as well as found a new target to try and carve to pieces.

"Alright, two left, then we regroup with the rest of the squadron" Aldric told her and she acknowledged. She headed forwards and led the enemy fighters in a straight line as Aldric engaged his own active camouflage and fell back, letting the hostile box craft pass by him

and close on the Captain.

"They're closingâ€|" she said over the coms as Aldric got a lock. He let loose two missiles which dropped their shields, and Sarah's turrets tore through their armor before they could try and flip around to engage the attacker. The resulting damage caused one of them to careen off the otherâ€| and smash into Aldric's fighter.

"Collision detected, warning, collision detected" Aldric heard as his fighter fought to restabilize with one of its wings damaged and stabilizer ripped off. Two thrusters were torn apart and his right engine he had to shut down as it sputtered.

"Aldric!" Sarah screamed as he tried to keep the fighter moving.

"I'm still here! Severe damage though. Shield emitters are offline, I'm not much use in the fire zone. We- oh hellâ€|" he trailed off as the fighters before falling apart had fired torpedoes in all directions at random, and one had locked onto him.

"Drop your flares!" Sarah yelled in pure horror as the torpedo closed.

"It's damaged! It won't dispense!" Aldric said as he looked at the coms connection he had with Sarah, the scared look in her eyes. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as there was nothing she could do. Her turrets were already firing at the torpedo, but there needed to be either a heat source for it to connect to or an explosive discharge, and the turret rounds didn't do either. In the time it took her to get behind him and release her own flares, the torpedo would hit, and most likely take her out and slam her remains into his fighter, killing him as well.

"I love you" he whispered to her.

"I love you too" she whispered back just as the torpedoâ€| was hit by a medusa missile.

"Am I fashionably late?" Jones said over the coms as his new and improved Falcata shot by, his guns opening up on the remaining torpedoes and he locked onto the craft firing them and spinning off into the void like a top. The enemy fighter was destroyed and all torpedoes were dealt with.

"Jones, you magnificent bastard! Nice timing!" Aldric laughed out loud as the Falcata pulled up nearby them.

"I am here to please. No worries, get back to the carrier for repairs, I'll keep escort" he said as he gave a thumbs up through the coms. Sarah giggled softly as her heart was beating a mile a minute.

"I'm going, but it's tough moving with one engine. Nice wings, how'd you get one?" Aldric asked him.

"Calling a tug right now, hopefully they'll get here before anything else happens. I was issued an upgrade, courtesy of a Colonel Shrike. Apparently it was a spare. She can be nice when she wants to be"

Jones replied as Sarah took a spot on his left wing, with all of them flying in a triangle.

"Commander! What's your status?" Elena ordered as she dove away from two torpedoes and tried to spot her squadron in all of the madness in space. He quickly explained his situation as he ran through damage checks.

"Heading back to the ship now. I'll be back out before you know it" he reported as he fluctuated his remaining thrusters to keep himself moving in a straight line. The tug wasn't coming as they were far too busy trying to pick up escape pods and blown cockpits.

"I'm providing escort now General. He'll get back safely" Jones commented. Sarah was literally slinking in her seat. She was awash with relief that the man she cared about was going to be alright. As the trio headed to the Conundrum and slowly brought the damaged Black Blade down into hangar four for repairs, Ezekiel chimed in over the coms.

"Raven 5-1, we don't have the mine dispenser replacements in hangar four at the moment, you need to head to hangar eight for a reload" he told her.

"I gotta get back to it guys, see you out in the furball" Jones said as he hit his thrusters and bolted back out towards the rest of the war zone.

"Understood and thanks" Aldric replied as he opened his cockpit once inside with Sarah heading back around to hangar eight. She landed carefully as the platform moved her inside and locked her landing wheels in place. The platform pulled her in and set her down on the cavernous hangar floor.

"Here. We'll have you rearmed in two minutes. Raven 4-1 will take some effort to get repaired; the techs are looking it over right now. If we're lucky we can replace the damaged parts in an hour" Ezekiel told her as he offered up a bottle of water to keep her hydrated.

"The battle could be well, over by then though" she told him.

"That's a good thing for him lass. Don't worry, if we can get him out there, we will, otherwise he can help with things on board. Lord knows we've got some damaged areas right now" the old tech told her. She nodded and took her helmet off in her cockpit and accepted the bottle of water. She drank quickly as the techs ran around her fighter and reloaded her missiles and turrets, and then resealed her helmet on her head.

"Hey, are you alright?" Aldric said over the coms.

"I'm fine now are you?" she asked quietly.

"No damage to the cockpit luckily. Looks like I'm grounded for a bit until they can get it back in working shape. I might be able to bum a ride with a Sabre though. Gotta wait until one lands however" he replied.

"Raven 5-1, rearming status?" Elena asked.

"Raven 5-1 here, rearming now. Almostâ€|" she said over the coms as Ezekiel nodded up at the cockpit and gave her a thumbs up.

"I'm finished. I-I'll head back out immediately" she reported in a much stronger voice. When it came to Elena, she didn't have to be quiet and recluse.

"Keep your cool Sarah. We just need someone to keep some squadrons off the vultures. They're acting like wrecking crews towards the smaller capital ships and we need them operational. Can you handle it?" the General asked. Elena was already shooting towards another target. She was on a kill streak.

"Copy that ma'am. I'll head out to assist. Aldric, Iâ€|" she started to say.

"Scrap some tin cans for me out there Sarah. I'll be right here unless I get a chance to ride shotgun" he chuckled over the coms. She smiled and took a deep breath. She was a pilot and she had a job to do. Her relationship with Aldric could wait, and she wanted revenge for them nearly killing him.

"Raven 5-1 loading onto rail" she reported in her soft voice as the platform moved her back through the blast doors. She felt a slight rock as the ship took some fire from enemy fighter craft outside.

"Breach in deck nine. Sealing section" she heard over the coms.

"Aldric?" she asked a bit worried.

"I'm still here. I'm closer to deck fourteen. We're all okay. Go get them" he reassured her. She squared her shoulders and nodded to no one, and launched to continue the fight.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

"\_I don't have to explain just how freaky this is gonna be" Seth said quietly to his friend as they both watched the Precursor sitting in the middle of the dreadnought.\_

"\_That's why you're going in, not me. I'll just poke around in the systems to confuse the crap out of them-" Aaron started to say.\_

"\_DO NOT touch those systems! You could tell the ship to fire its giant laser of face melty death, if it has one! I'd rather not make it any harder on the fleet damn it! Justâ€| do me a favor, go back and help the rest of the fleet, I need to know that I have the time given to me to handle this, and I'd like it very much if there was someone out there running interception and giving me a time estimate" he snapped.\_

"\_What? Seth, you can't be serious, you can't do this alone" Aaron replied, ignoring the aggravated words his superior just spouted.\_

"\_I can do it. The last time I learned how to ease in, with someone holding the door open. If I can find that connection, pull it out, then run like hell, then this whole thing will work without a bouncer at the door. No reason to put you in harm's way while you can block incoming fire heading towards our ships. Trust me on this" the senior remote viewer told him.\_

"\_Sethâ€¦ fine, but if you even think you might need backup, call and I'll come running. Thelma is out there trying to keep the tunnels closed while the Precursors try and burrow through them with some drilling equipment. Good luck man" Aaron said and Seth felt his consciousness leave his vicinity.\_

"\_Alright you son of a bitch, let's see what makes you tickâ€¦" Seth growled as he dove towards the Precursor's head and started to pick at different locations. He had absolutely no idea what he was looking for, how the Precursor mind worked, or anything for that matter.\_

\_As he drifted from memory to memory, most extremely confusing and would be forgotten considering that they were not made for Seth's mind unless it was attached to him, he noticed one that seemed to be of similar information to his education into neural physics. He saw the distinct similarities, and decided to dive in. He was in awe at the capability to contain energy and reworked matter into a physical object. Their theories and research into neural physics was beyond anything they were studying back on Earth by centuries. The mathematics alone were a hair above even what he knew.\_

\_He found the connection to the shipyard, a memory and picture of the immense station being "built" at the start of its inception, with twenty other Precursors lending their minds to assist in the process. Once it was complete, they disconnected from each other, allowing this one to keep the thought contained in his own mind.\_

\_Seth slowly connected the thought to his own, being very careful as to not alert the Precursor as to what was happening. It felt like he was weaving through a party and he was an uninvited guest that got past the guards and waiters. As he finished and tried to pull out of the alien's mind, he was grappled by something and constricted, feeling himself slowly fade as pain shot through him.\_

"\_God damn it!" he barked as he wrestled with the mind of this Precursor "Master Engineer". The creature blocked his attempts to pull free and run, and tried to envelope him with his own mind. Seth started to panic as he realized he could be eaten alive by this huge ancient being, with all of his knowledge consumed and used to figure out defenses of Earth and the people he cared about.\_

\_He thought carefully as he tried to break away. It felt almost like a sticky tongue from a frog latched onto a fly or beetle to him. If this in fact was similar, then he needed to find a way to become poisonous or damage the tongue, which was most likely still attached to the mental schematic for the shipyard.\_

"\_Damn itâ€¦ she told me not to do itâ€¦" he whispered to himself as he decided immediately that fragmenting his mind was far more preferable than being swallowed by this xenophobic engineer.\_



"\_Montez! I'm going Super Seth!" he trailed his voice back to the lab.\_

"Wait, what? I thought we agreed onâ€¦ never mind, your vitals are spiking, you've gotta do something to get away!" Montez said over the coms as Serina relayed the conversation back to Seth's point in space.

"\_Doing it now!" He yelled and fragmented. He felt the mind of the Precursor trying to grab at the pieces as they flew in different directions, all coming back in a different spot. It was similar to a person being annoyed by gnats. \_

"\_We don't die! We multiply!" He yelled as the fragments all came back together, producing a large amount of energy that Seth kept containedâ€¦ right inside the Precursor.\_

"Sethâ€¦ I'm not reading a huge power increase around your poâ€¦ oh myâ€¦" Montez said as he faintly heard a POP! come from Seth's viewpoint. The Precursor was no longer among the living, as its body was splattered around the room it was in.

"\_\*\*That was the most disgusting thing I've ever seenâ€¦\*\*\_\_ Seth relayed back to the lab. Jenny turned away from the viewscreen and covered her mouth.\_

"We got them on the run! They're regrouping!" Seth heard from transmitted coms to the pod as he looked through a spare visual towards the battle ensuing. The Precursors were regrouping near the dreadnought.

"We might have got them beat!" Aldric said as the ships pulled back and disengaged.

"\_\*\*Uh ohâ€¦\*\*\_\_ Seth was worried now, as the Precursors now knew something was up.\_

"Something's not rightâ€¦ there's no way it could be this easyâ€¦" Elena whispered to herself.

"Ma'am" Dariah said to Dare as the Captain turned around.

"I've got slip space exit coordinates showing up. A lot of them" she said as the blood drained from her face. Dare stared at her for a second and then at her screen as the exit points started to open up. Ten exit points, twenty, forty, eighty, two hundredâ€¦ four hundred Precursor ships exited slip space near the dreadnought.

"\_\*\*Son of a bitch! There was a spare fleet? Where? Oh godâ€¦ right where they left fromâ€¦" \*\*\_\_Seth knew somehow that the fleet was most likely building up at the same position the original fleet had started, and they didn't notice it due to thinking the enemy would only attempt one strike force.\_

"God almightyâ€¦" Roberts whispered over the coms. There was no chance of surviving against those odds.

"Dareâ€¦ activate the NOVA bombs hidden near that exit point!" Elena ordered. They knew the Precursors would come out and or near recommended points of travel in the solar system, and NOVA bombs were

pre placed at those positions in the event they couldn't win. They had to be extremely careful with the blast range in not taking themselves out however.

"We just sent the signals. Nothing. The timers are being jammed" Dare replied quietly. Everyone was silent for a moment. They're last ditch action to survive just went out the window. The bridge was suddenly deathly quiet as they all realized this could be the end of them. It wasn't working as they had hoped. The last time the NOVA bombs could detonate on their own. Now their last defense was mitigated by the enemy's jamming systems.

Just then, the Precursor defense systems engaged on Seth.

"\_\*\*Argh! God damn it! Fuck!" \*\*\_\_He screamed as pain shot through his mind like a thousand ice picks. He backed out of the ship immediately, launched mostly by the strike, and struggled to focus.\_

"Seth! You've got to dump your excess energy immediately or you could lose control over it! If you don't you could take out the whole sector!" Montez barked over the coms.

"\_\*\*No! no! Fine! Alright! Can't even get a chance to work with it! ugh! fuck!" \*\*\_\_ he said as he flitted out to the edge of the galaxy and blew the spare energy in another super nova. He did it just in time as he felt weak and somewhat fading.\_

"We're gonna pull you out now! Be ready for an emergency pod blow" Dr. Montez said as he looked at Jenny. Seth heard over the coms the ground forces below.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

"We can't hold! They're forcing us down the tunnel! We've got to evacuate!" Buck responded as rail fire was heard in the distance, and a warthog suddenly flipped. Marines ran down the tunnel in pairs, still firing behind them as they tried to escape.

"You have to hold that control room! We cannot allow them to have it!" Dare ordered over the coms.

"We'll try and flank them but we've already lost most of our defensive foothold! Just hold on!" he yelled as a plasma round zipped past, a Spartan opening up on the attacker.

"We've gotta go now" Fred ordered the sergeant as Buck looked up at him. He nodded and was silent over the coms as they ran down the tunnel with Fred providing covering fire. The Precursors were thundering after them, but ignored their escape as they headed for the sealed off forcefield of the control room. They then took defensive positions to hold the line while two of their kind walked up to the passageway and placed equipment the likes of which they had never seen on the forcefield.

"Uh, this isn't good! They're trying to break in somehow!" Mickey yelled as he fired his SMG.

"Your grasp of the obvious is inspirational genius" Dutch grumbled as

he fired his Spartan Laser and nailed one of the guarding Precursor soldiers square in the chest. Its shields flickered and failed as Buck fired his assault rifle alongside the rest of the marines holding the line in the second tunnel.

"If they break through we're all fucked!" Ash snapped as he fired his battle rifle at one of the engineers. A Precursor soldier jumped in front of the other alien and blocked the attacks. A HAMMER drone rolled nearby, firing its gauss rifle straight at the enemy forces. It was quickly scrapped as it was the worst threat in the vicinity, but not before it ripped apart four separate soldiers by itself. All Spartans were firing from cover at the Precursor soldiers trying to break through the barrier.

\*\*[Back at the Fleet]\*\*

"This is General Gripen. All fighters retreat, do not engage! I don't want you near the blast radius of that bomb! All UNSC forces are to pull back as far as possible!" she said as Seth noticed she was heading out on her own, straight towards the enemy fleet.

"\_What? No! NO!" Seth yelled out\_.

"We've gotta pull you out now Seth! You don't have a pacemaker functional! You're vitals are fluctuating even now!" Dr. Montez yelled as he motioned for Jenny to activate the ejection sequence.

"\_No! Serina! Stop them please! I've gotta! she's gonna get herself killed!" Seth responded, desperate to keep in the pod. The third strike had now happened, however, and he would be immune to the effect of the defense systems if they fired again.\_

"Serina belay that! He needs to come out now!" Montez ordered. Elena engaged her active camouflage and shot towards the NOVA bomb, hiding in plain sight as she headed for a drive by for a close range activation. Seth thought she was committing suicide, but if everything went as she planned, she'd fly right by the explosive, activate the bomb with a dropped missile and slip space out with her fighter. The one reason they didn't use their slip space drives to repair the carrier's engines was for the fact that the parts were incompatible. She already eyed her exit point that she could easily slip through.

Serina was silent for a moment.

"\_Serina! please! if it doesn't work she's gonna be all alone out there with nothing keeping them from blowing her to hell! I've got to stay in here!" Seth begged. His mind was somewhat tingling, the first signs that he really should be getting out of the pod. It was slightly difficult to focus for him.\_

"\_Aaron! I need your help here!" Seth yelled out.\_

"\_I'm sorry Seth, Antonio is right! you could die in there!" Aaron replied as he sighed, not wanting to tell his friend what he didn't want to hear.\_

"Order accepted, locking down pod. You're staying in" Serina finally said, and locked down the reactors that were placed to power the pod

and systems. The power couplings were sealed, and there was no way beyond Serina opening the pod herself to get him out.

"Serina! You can't do this! Your job is to protect him! You're letting him sacrifice himself forâ€¦" Dr. Montez trailed off.

"The woman that he loves" she finished his sentence as Elena's fighter headed towards the enemy fleet quickly, dodging fighters that didn't know she was there. More started to pour out and head towards the UNSC fleet.

"The fighters will re-engage in five minutes at their current speed to us" Dare reported. Elena's eyes went wide. If they left the blast radius then the fleet would still be in danger. She had to be quick. One of the fighters nearby barely skimmed her wing as she dodged and slid across the shields of a cruiser. The fluctuation of the energy emitted made her worry, as the light show as it traveled down the length of the ship might tell them that she was there. Her fears came true as beams tried to slice through the area they thought she was at.

"Shit!" she swore as she broke her flight path and dodged, weaving around another destroyer and dodging another fighter. She was doing her best to keep away from anything that could detect her, but it was extremely difficult. Just as she was nearing the bomb, her luck all but disappeared. A launching fighter left a hangar on a nearby cruiser, and nearly slammed into her. The resulting collision was lessened by an invisible barrier trying to nullify the damage as it was made by an unseen guardian angel as well as her rolling with the impact, but the maneuver still threw her off course and skimming along the side of a battleship.

"\_Oh shitâ€¦\_" Seth winced as he noticed she was traveling right over a beam emitter.\_

"Incoming shot!" Dare's weapons officer said as they knew the battleships could fire at extreme ranges once every five minutes. It didn't do nearly as much damage as they had first thought it would, but the fact that it could hit them as far as it did meant that the enemy had a range advantage. They also had something that the \_Conundrum\_ at that moment did not have. Shields. The resulting emission barely grazed Elena's fighter as she tried to keep stealthed, but it was enough to knock her active camouflage out of alignment and wake the fleet up to her presence. They now knew exactly where she was.

"Fuck!" She screamed as she dove as fast as she could towards the bomb, now on her sensors as she checked for the active camouflage ID ping they placed on it. The fleet moved into action and closed around her, trying to collapse in on itself to take her out. Her exit path was now blocked. Time seemed to freeze as she could hear her breathing in her helmet, saw the beams flying by attempting to carve her to pieces. She dodged almost in slow motion, maneuvering the fighter towards her destination. She now knew what she had to try and do.

\*\*[Music: Johan Johannson â€" The Sun's Gone Dim and the Sky's Turned Black]\*\*

The small Black Blade fighter dove right under a knifing beam aiming

for her as she headed for the bomb. The fighter dodged and moved with the beams as they moved towards her, dancing through the area like a professional. She readied her rail guns and took careful aim. She was going to fire directly on it since it was already armed previously. The remote detonation was the only thing that wasn't functioning. She fired just as a beam hit her wing, rolling her somewhatâ€¦ but the rounds hit.

"\_NO!" Seth screamed as he decided, right at that moment, that he would sacrifice himself in her place. He fragmented his mind a second time that dayâ€¦ with no pacemaker.\_

As the bomb went off and started to envelope everything around it, Elena closed her eyes and thought about Seth, his smiling face and her family. She thought about her brother watching out for her when she was a paraplegic, how Amber joked with her, and Marcus. She then saw her life flash before her eyes, her time in high school, her flight patch Amber got her, the flight jacket Andy bought, the Esprit. She remembered meeting Seth and Andy, her trip with her father in his pelican, everything.

"I'm sorryâ€¦" she whispered as her fighter was enveloped by the blastâ€¦ and washed over a bubble surrounding her. Her fighter continued flying true, heading straight through the blast wave as it was contained by yet another bubble to keep the allied fleet from losing anyone else.

As she exited the blast and slowly brought her fighter around, somewhat damaged and a bit cooked, she marveled what she thought Seth had just done. The entire fleet was wiped out, dreadnought and all. Not even the Precursors seemed to be able to survive a NOVA bomb, especially one contained in some bubble barrier created by a Remote Viewer and amplified with whatever energy he provided.

"His vitals are failing! He's dropping!" Dr. Montez screamed as he pleaded with Serina to let them eject Seth.

"This is ground team! The beacon was destroyed! The bastards broke through the force field andâ€¦ the beacon just vaporized! The whole control room is in flames! We're pulling back!" Elena heard over the coms as the fighter pilots cheered. The Marines were in awe as the Precursors looked like they were incinerated by an unknown force as they entered the control room.

"Thanks honâ€¦" Elena whispered. No response.

"I don't know how you did that, but if it's what I think it was, I'll let it slide" she said again. No response.

"Seth?" she asked. No response.

"General Gripen to \_Conundrum,\_ enemy fleet neutralized, what's the status of 2nd R&D lab?" Elena asked.

"Elenaâ€¦ you need to get back here quickâ€¦ you're not gonna like thisâ€¦" Serina said quietly over the coms. Elena thought for a split second before pushing her engines to full and heading straight back to the carrier. It was the longest ten minutes of her life, even longer than her recent brush with death and making her attack run on the NOVA bomb.

She requested priority landing clearance with a wavering voice, and as she landed on the platform, she agonized over the precious seconds it took her to enter inside the ship. She could see on her approach the damage the carrier had taken, the areas that had been hit. She could only imagine the loss of life on board. As she opened her cockpit and jumped from the side, she could see blown panels on the walls and a fire that was recently put out. She had to get to the lab quickly.

The young pilot ran as fast as her legs could carry her to the lift and ascended, almost holding her breath as it finally reached the deck she wanted. She saw techs working on panels on the walls, rewiring circuitry as she passed them. She reached the lab DECON room and went through. What she walked into was her worst nightmare.

"Get those charge paddles off of him! Get me that Epinephrine now!" Dr. Montez roared as Jenny and some other nurses grabbed a crash cart and wheeled it back from a bed with Seth laying in it. She nearly broke into a run but a nurse caught her and held her back. Montez shoved the needle into Seth's chest and emptied the contents into it. He checked for a heart rate for twenty seconds.

"No effect!" Dr. Montez yelled as they readied a mixture of drugs to restart the heart. Montez went back to what he previously was doing, which was chest compressions.

"Ma'am! Ma'am settle down! They're doing everything they can!" He held her back as she felt tears falling from her eyes and was clawing at air, fighting to reach her fianc . Seth wasn't moving.

"SETH! SETH WAKE UP! GOD WAKE UP! PLEASE!" she screamed as they tried again. She sobbed as they readied the next needle and inserted it into his chest. They waited for the effects to occur. The effects never showed. Elena could hear her own heart beat as she struggled with the nurse to break free and rush to get to him, but somehow, a nagging voice in the back of her head told her something.

\_He's dead. Nothing you do will fix that.\_

They waited for a full minute as Montez continued chest compressions.

"Doctor  DOCTOR! It's been ten minutes  chances of brain damage are one hundred percent  he's gone " Jenny told him as he stopped doing the chest compressions. The commotion stopped as Elena stepped on the nurse's foot, elbowed him and flipped him over her shoulder. He was a nurse, but she was a trained fighter pilot. She ran quickly to the bed, but stopped just barely at the foot. Seth's eyes were closed, with no movement of his chest. He looked almost peaceful. She slowly walked to the side, staring at his face. The man she loved was gone.

"Time of death  1246 hours  goodbye my friend " Montez softly said.

"No  god no " she croaked as her legs gave out and she fell to the floor, with Jenny and another nurse running to her aid. She just cried for what seemed like an eternity as they slowly wheeled his body out of the lab and towards the medical ward.

"Where are you taking him?" She suddenly snapped, red eyed and with an angry glare.

"All bodies are taken to the medical ward Elena. Standard procedure. You can go with it if you want" Montez told her. She looked around at everyone and slowly got to her feet. She was numb to the core. She followed the bed as they wheeled his body down the hallway and towards the medical ward.

As they entered, Elena could see the wounded and dying everywhere. Doctors and nurses ran from place to place, as they moved his body into a small room and placed a sheet over him. She sat down on a small stool next to his body as they left her in peace. She just stared at the sheet, wondering how it had all happened. He was dead because he protected her from the explosion. She had shot towards the bomb to stop the fleet from killing thousands more, but her plan had unexpected turn, so it became a suicide run.

She started to think long and hard on what she could have done differently, whether fired a long range missile and guided it in or tried to maneuver in at a different direction so the enemy wouldn't have noticed her as quickly. She ran hundreds of different actions through her head on what she could have done, what she screwed up on. What she did know, was that her fianc  was dead.

"We did it. We stopped them. We won hon. They can't hurt us anymore" she started to say as her voice wavered and broke. She brought her hand up to her mouth as fresh tears welled up in her eyes. She obviously got no response to her words. She looked away from the sheet and over her shoulder to see Montez and Jenny talking and then look at her. Montez nodded understanding her sadness. She turned back around and leaned her head against the bed and cried again.

What she didn't notice was the sheet near the nose move as if breathing was happening.

"I love you" she whispered.

"God?" she heard as a small whisper. She looked up in awe as she saw under the sheet the head moving around, as if confused. She pulled back the sheet and saw something that nearly made her heart jump into her throat, and immense joy. Seth's eyes were open, and he was looking around in confusion.

"Seth?" she asked as she slowly put her hand out to his face, almost worried it was just an illusion and he was still dead.

"Don't tell me it didn't work  I gave it my all  you can't be dead " he softly said with a very weak voice as he looked at her. He looked incredibly worn out and his skin looked as white as the sheet he was covered in.

"I'm not dead  and neither are you" she croaked out and pulled back the sheet a bit more to bring up his hand and kiss it. She squeezed his fingers gently as he looked down at her.

"So it worked? I'm alive?" he asked. He still looked incredibly confused.

"Yes it worked!" she said half chuckling.

"Good. That sucked. I don't wanna do that again" he told her as he looked around to see where he was.

"Great way to celebrate your birthday, having a near death experience" she laughed out to him.

"I'm alive, that's the best birthday present I could ever have. Would have settled for a new pair of shoes thoughâ€¦ or a beltâ€¦ or somethingâ€¦" he told her. Dr. Montez rushed into the room as did Jenny as they gawked. They immediately snapped into action as they checked his blood pressure and heart rate.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Montez asked.

"Four, and technically speaking you have five up cause your pinky tends to raise when checking my wrist's pulse" Seth replied weakly. They ran through more tests on him as they attached diodes to his forehead to check for brain wave patterns. Elena was practically jumping out of her seat the entire time, though she was still worried about him. He was alive, but just barely.

"Could I have some water please?" he asked as he tried to clear his throat. Elena nodded and grabbed a glass and poured some water for him, and he drank eagerly.

"I really don't understand this. You've been dead for over twenty minutes, and I'm not detecting any brain wave irregularitiesâ€¦ you've answered every question I've given youâ€¦ you aren't showing any degeneration of cellular structure. This is incredible" Dr. Montez said as he raised his eyebrows trying to make sense of the whole thing.

"I like being whole please. I do not wish to be dissected to understand how I did it, and I'd rather not try it again. I don't think I couldâ€¦ it was like I justâ€¦ refused to leave or something" he said as his eyelids slowly drooped.

"Seth?" Elena suddenly broke out of her happiness that he was alive and was filled with concern.

"It's ok, I'm justâ€¦ tiredâ€¦ and really coldâ€¦" he warned her. His fingers were like ice in her hands.

"Expected. Jenny, put the slap patches on him and have the IVs inserted immediately. He's not quite out of the woods yet" Dr. Montez said as Jenny nodded. Elena looked at both of them in confusion as they placed nutrient patches on his arms and legs and inserted IVs into his veins. Jenny placed an oxygen mask over his face and grabbed warmed up blankets. She then wrapped his legs and body up with four separate blankets.

"He needs to relax and rest. The next twenty four hours are crucial" Jenny told Elena. The General nodded softly and looked at Seth. Before he fell asleep he gave her a thumbs up. She grabbed his thumb gently and held his hand for a moment before letting go. He was asleep.

"Round the clock surveillance, I want a fluid bag change every chance



you get, swab nutrient paste on his lips and neck" Dr. Montez told Jenny and she nodded in agreement. The other GRID nurses stayed nearby as they checked on his vitals.

"General Gripen?" a doctor from the medical ward said from the door. Elena looked over at the woman standing there.

"Yes?" she asked, not wanting to leave her future husband.

"I've been told you need to check on one of your pilots. It's involving a Captain Reist. I don't know the details, but it seems the recent damage and death of a Commander Aldric-" the doctor started to explain to her.

"Wait, death? What?" Elena asked. She had just gotten her fianc  back. Now she learns that one of her friends is dead?

"That's correct. Captain Dare can explain more ma'am. I have other patients to attend to" she said and walked away, apologizing to the General. Elena just stood there. Seth was alive, but a friend of hers was supposedly dead, alongside Sarah who was more than likely an absolute wreck.

She looked over at the bed one more time, and straightened up. There was no immediate threat, Seth was alive, and now she needed to take care of a friend. She didn't want to break herself away from him, but she had to leave.

"I'll be back later" Elena told Jenny. Jenny nodded, and the pilot walked out of the room and headed for the bridge. As she walked inside, she saw just how much damage there was. Blown out screens, hanging wires, but no deaths. It wasn't like the movies where a station blew up and someone flipped end over end over their seat. Things just took damage from shocks and blasts from outside the bridge caused backlashes inside. Dare was checking over the shoulder of Dariah who was watching the rest of the fighters coming in. She noticed Elena walk in and looked up to salute.

"At ease, I need some information" Elena said as Dare looked hesitant. She looked around and motioned for her to come into her office. As they both entered and Dare shut the door, she turned to her.

"The lancing beam that the battleship fired while you were in the middle of that death trap hit hangar four" Veronica told her quietly. Elena didn't understand, and stood there.

"So hangar four was hit, how many casualties?" she trailed off as Dare nodded.

"Commander Aldric was in fact inside the hangar when the blast hit. Structural integrity was lost, and whoever wasn't taken out by the blast was most likely spaced. Explosive decompression was very quick" Veronica told her. Elena's stomach sunk. Sarah was probably mentally broken right now.

"Where? how? wouldn't Commander Aldric move to the rest of the ship for god damn it?" Elena growled out annoyed, running her left hand through her hair. Dare waited patiently.

"There would be a GPS signal on Aldric's suit right? Did it get disabled?... no, wait, no GPS because-" Elena started to say.

"In the event a pilot is shot down, they activate it only if help is coming to pick them up, or the enemy may be able to locate them. Unless he landed somewhere which means he went through a burn in which wouldn't happen for at least another two hours of him floating out there, the alternative isâ€¦ not goodâ€¦" Veronica told her softly. Elena felt like crying again, but she was a General, and couldn't do it in front of the Captain.

"I'llâ€¦ I'll go talk to Captain Reistâ€¦ umâ€¦ thank youâ€¦" Elena mumbled out, and promptly left. As she walked down the hallways and took a lift to Sarah's deck, she ran through what she would say to her. What could she say? She had no idea how to console the blonde pilot. Her boyfriend was more than likely dead, or lost in space. She had no idea how to help her.

As the General reached Sarah's room, she stood there in front of the door, just thinking. It seemed like an hour, but somehow she managed to bring herself to hit the request to enter button on the keypad. There was no response.

"Cherry, Sarah Reist is in her quarters right?" Elena asked.

"Yessum" Cherry responded quickly.

"Thank you" Elena replied and hit the request again. No response.

"Cherry, crack the door under my authority" the black haired woman said. The AI unlatched the locks and opened the door. The room was dark, as not one light was on. Elena walked in and turned on her night vision lenses in her eyes and looked around. There, sitting curled up with her head resting on her knees and her back against the bed board, was Sarah. She looked like she had been crying for a while. Her helmet was laying on the floor, and her suit was dropped as well. She was just sitting there in a tank top and underwear, not moving.

"Uhâ€¦ Iâ€¦" Elena tried to say, but nothing came out. Sarah didn't even shift at the sound of her voice. Elena walked up slowly and sat down on her bed, staring at her. She had no words that would make it better.

"I'm so sorry Sarahâ€¦" she whispered to her as the blonde hair slightly moved. Sarah barely peeked over her knees and looked at her. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"I should have stayed" she said almost in a whisper.

"Then you would have died with him" Elena replied.

"Then we'd be dead together!" Sarah snapped. Fresh tears built up in her eyes as her face contorted in anger.

"He wouldn't have wanted that" Elena told her, and Sarah calmed down. All of the anger washed away from her face as she leaned her forehead against her knees again. Elena didn't have anything to say beyond

that. She reached over and put her hand on her friend's shoulder and tried to give her a pat. Sarah didn't really respond to it. She finally got up and gave her a hug around her curled up frame, as Sarah after a few seconds leaned her head against Elena's chest and cried. The rest of the day was spent taking care of Sarah, and the rest of the fleet helping wounded and tagging the dead. There was no more fighting, as they waited for the repair fleet to reach them.

(Author's Note: Yeahâ€¦ really long one, close to 19k wordsâ€¦ I was thinking of splitting the whole thing up into multiple chapters, but I figured since I hadn't posted in a while, that this would sort of make up for it. So, Sarahâ€¦ Elena can't save everyone, no matter how hard she tries. Things happen that no one could have predicted, even in the safety of the Conundrum. Please review and comment! I know I didn't put in as much detail as I should have, and if I did this would have definitely been split up into multiple chapters at close to 40k words.)

## 24. Repair Bill

\*\*[0800 hours, July 27\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Salvation Colony]\*\*

The supply fleet arrived three days after the battle of Salvation. Three days of silent prayer that the Precursors didn't attack again. They never did. The beacon was destroyed, and any reason for them coming to the planet were more than likely gone with it. The cost was high however.

Of the remaining ships of the UNSC 5th fleet, ten made it out. The Conundrum took moderate damage but was still functioning, and the other nine faired the same treatment. The Sangheili fleet had lost two thirds of their capital ships, and a high number of their fighters. The ground forces for both sides were nearly overrun, with casualty rates of some battalions at one hundred percent. Even Renee's platoon had lost four men. The Elites had dropped eight Scarabs to assist the planetary defenses. Six were destroyed. Every remaining wing of fighters belonging to the UNSC fleet had casualties, including Elena's. Aurora's Eagle Squadron had lost two Falcatas, although one had intentionally sacrificed itself to stop a torpedo from hitting a Pelican filled with wounded. Aurora had the rest of her squadron transferred to the Conundrum after the battle was over to condense pilots.

Elena spent the next three days switching between checking on Seth as he went through a rehabilitation schedule with nutrient injections and neurological charts as well as physical training to get his body back to normal, and taking care of Sarah. She had the blonde pilot taken off active duty so that she could mourn. The young General spent the time making sure she was eating right, taking vitamins, making sure she was getting adequate sleep, and basically being a mother to her. She didn't have the heart to show her the video footage she had seen involving hangar four.

The video had been heart rending, as one moment there were people moving about doing their duties, the next the blast doors were blown away and explosive decompression set in. Men and women screamed almost silently as they were pulled out alongside a damaged Sabre and

parts for a Pelican. Aldric had his helmet off during that time, and as he clawed to grab at a nearby metal rung on a bolted down ladder, his helmet flew right by along with a maintenance worker. He nearly made it to an emergency air system before he was struck by another piece of debris and lost his grip. His last moments on the video were trying to clutch at his helmet which was a mere three feet away. Elena could barely watch. He barely reached it and placed it over his head, breathing in the much needed air and protecting his face from the cold vacuum. The relief was short lived, as another piece of equipment slammed into him and knocked his thrusters off kilter, sending him flying out of range of the camera view. They lost contact with him shortly after.

Sarah was a zombie on the ship. Her eyes were hollow and her body was numb. She was a shadow of what she was before, not even the meek and timid pilot anymore. She had almost come out of her shell with Aldric. Now Elena had to pick her up and bring her to wherever she thought she could see a smile out of her or get her to respond. The rest of the crew was in a similar mode, as almost everyone had lost friends. The toll was too high.

The ground forces were brought back up in intervals, slowly bringing them to the remainder of ships they had available with what Pelicans they had. Even Elena's Father took some hits as one of his thruster gimbles was torn off. He was able to make it back to the ship, but just barely. Jacobs and Merricks watched over Sarah when Elena wasn't around, but Falken spent most of her time shuttling between the ships checking on the remaining pilots. The new wing under Elena's command had a fifty percent death toll, but still proved their mettle.

\*\*[1600 hours, July 30\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ Salvation Colony]\*\*

The fleet was mostly repaired as the last Pelican was brought up. They were ready to leave as 3rd fleet came in to relieve them.

"All drives ready to go ma'am" Dare's flight officer reported.

"That's oddâ€¦|" Dariah whispered to herself as she seemed to have a ping from a wreck of a cruiser that had crashed on the second moon of the planet.

"Alright, let's get under-" Dare started to say.

"Ma'am, hold that thought!" Dariah yelled out. Everyone looked at her.

"I've got a signal ping from \_Broken Laurels\_ on Salvation's 2nd moon. It's UNSC. It's faintâ€¦| but it's a Sabre IFF." Dare and Elena blinked in surprise.

"An S.O.S.? I thought we picked up everyone from the escape pods?" Elena asked. Dare nodded.

"The ship didn't have any life signs when it slammed into that moon either. The cruiser was gutted and evacuated early in the battle" Dare explained.

"Could it be just a glitch in the system?" Elena asked. Dariah looked at her screen.

"Ma'am, I don't think so. I think we might wanna go take a look" the fighter tactical officer told them.

\*\*[Two Hours Later]\*\*

"Do you have contact with the IFF signal?" Elena asked. There were two ground teams that had been landed on the surface and checking inside the hulk of the ship.

"No contact yet ma'am, drones are sifting through what they can. Lot of debris in here" the ODSF Lieutenant reported back. Elena and Dare stood silently on the bridge as the mission went underway.

"Think it could be a trap? A last ditch effort on the Precursors part?" Dare whispered to Elena. She shrugged.

"There's no way off the moon without getting on board a Pelican, and it's not even on the ground. I wonder if it is just that; a glitched piece of equipment. Not all of the fighter craft launched from them safely" Elena responded quietly.

The ground force slowly advanced through the ship, prying doors open and crawling up ladders with ARGUS drones and HAMMER drones following where they could and providing lighting. CRB drones would cut through some doors with plasma cutters while ODSFs and techs crawled through holes.

"I think I found something hey HEY! Out of curiosity, what was the Sabre's IFF signal?" Mickey yelled out as everyone looked at him.

"Yeah, what was the callsign?" Dutch asked wondering if he was onto something.

"We're entering the cryo bay" another squad reported.

"Checking Wolf 3-1" Dariah reported back to them.

"I think he's got the right idea what was the IFF of the Sabre that blew out from Hangar Four?" Elena asked surprised that Mickey caught onto this before even she did.

"Wolf 3-1" Dariah said quietly and looked over at her Captain and General.

"We found a cryo pod in use!" the second squad reported.

"It's got to be him" Elena said in a matter of fact tone with a smile creeping up on her face.

"Found the IFF beacon looks like it was ripped out of the Sabre finger marks hang on, blue paint on one spot I've got a Spartan in this cryo pod people, let's get him out" the squad reported. Elena turned on her heel and stormed towards the door.

"I want that pod on this ship yesterday" she barked out, but she had a large smile on her face. Aldric was coming home with them

alive.

\*\*[Two Hours Later]\*\*

"He's hot, blowing the pins in five!" A tech reported as Elena stood there. Sarah was right next to her, eyes glittering. The pressure seals popped and hissed as the door slowly opened up, a wave of fog erupting from it. The pilot inside didn't move at first, but slowly came around.

"Give him a wake up stim to help out" another tech ordered, and the men nearby acknowledged. The pilot slowly moved his head. His helmet visor was severely cracked and damaged, with a dent in the side of the armor. Sarah was suddenly very worried that there was something that he needed medical attention for.

As the pilot removed his helmet, Aldric's face showed behind it. Sarah rushed forward and hugged him, his armor still freezing cold from being in the pod.

"Hey, looks like you got the signal" Aldric croaked out as he was still adjusting to coming out of the pod.

"You could have just used your GPS beacon" Dare grumbled.

"Damaged ma'am, as you can see" Aldric replied as he held his helmet in one hand with the other arm wrapped around Sarah's smaller frame. He was back.

"Good to have you back Commander" Elena said with a smile creeping onto her face.

"Good to be found ma'am" he replied as he patted Sarah on her back gently. She just held him tightly, not caring about the cold of his armor.

"How the hell did you get in there anyways?" Dare asked.

"When the debris hit and knocked me around and away from the ship, I couldn't get my thrusters built into my armor to right me up fast enough to maintain velocity with the Conundrum while it was moving. Despite its size, she's pretty fast. The next best thing was to move to the gutted remains of the cruiser along with the ripped out IFF beacon from the Sabre that got spaced with me. I'm just glad I was able to get into a cryo pod before the whole thing slammed into the moon. Being a popsicle saved my life, but I didn't know if you'd pick the signal up" he told her.

"We nearly didn't. We were about to gate out. It's been six days since the battle Aldric" Elena told him. He looked up from Sarah and stared at everyone.

"Just in the nick of time then" he replied with a smirk on his face.

"I'll say" Sarah said softly as she hugged him.

\*\*[1216 hours, August 11\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ En route to Sol System]\*\*

The next two weeks were spent in silent contemplation for the whole fleet. Very few spoke, as they spent most of their time maintaining the ship or in their quarters. Even Elena found it hard to keep focus. Over half of the marines accepted the chance to enter cryo sleep for the trip back. Sarah on the other hand, woke up to the world now that Aldric was back. She was smiling continuously around the other pilots of the wing. The chances of seeing her or Aldric outside their quarters for the trip, however, were slim.

Seth finished his rehabilitation and was able to work out in the gym again. Dr. Montez had explained how his nanotube modifications to his cortex were damaged, and he'd have to go through surgery within the next two years due to his stunt in the pod. It wasn't life threatening, but he'd need to get them replaced.

Of the times Aldric came out of Sarah's quarters, Elena would have few chances to dance with him. Sarah wanted to learn a few moves, and so he obliged easily. Sarah also had admirable respect from the remaining pilots, as once she had found out about Hangar Four being hit, she had flown into a berserk mode, or in Seth's words, a "Heroic BSOD and then the kill button was hit. The Oh Crap moment arrived for the Precursors." Her kill count was almost as high as Elena's, and had earned a nickname. She was still very soft spoken, but much more open to her friends. She had grown some confidence after Aldric's "apparent death." It would take some effort to get her to fully come out of her shell with anyone beyond Elena and Aldric, but Elena believed after a few years she'd be open and far more responsive with psychiatric help, and being tended to by her boyfriend.

"Attention all crew. This is the Captain. We will be arriving at Earth in approximately ten minutes. Be prepared for gate out. Captain out" Elena heard over the intercom. She was sitting in her office with Seth sitting in a nearby chair reading through a report.

"So let me get this straightâ€¦ you blew up the beacon, and yet the shipyard is still out there?" Elena asked after Seth finally opened up on his actions to her. Salvation Colony was behind them now.

"Iâ€¦ have the schematics connected to me now hon. It's really complicated, but the beacon is destroyed. I saw at the last second the bastards had entered the control room, and would have activated the thing if I didn't do something quickly. I needed to leave the pod fast, and I didn't have the time to work any other plans into effect. I took it out. It was a tough call, but I think it was the right choice" he explained. She let out a long drawn out sigh.

"So what happens to the shipyard now? Do you have control over it?" Elena asked.

"No, well, not really. I can feel the connection, I just don't understand anything about it. I can literally see the thing in my ocular HUD at will now, which leads me to believe the Engineer was part cybernetic to keep up with everything connected to his psyche. He's dead obviously, but it makes me wonder what else was attached to him. I didn't exactly go snooping through his whole head. I could have foundâ€¦ hell, who knows how much information that could have helped us" he told her.

"Or you could have been killed" Elena almost whispered to him. He

looked up from the report to see the pain in her eyes as she remembered seeing him lying there on the medical bed, lifeless.

"I'm sorry sweetheart" he said quietly. He reached over and squeezed her hand gently, and she squeezed back.

"What's done is done. Hopefully Tachi can figure something out from the data mine we did before, and get another beacon made. Could take some time though. Until then, that shipyard is floating out there, but it's ours. We just don't have the on switch" Seth explained. He went back to reading his report.

The gate out was uneventful as the damaged fleet limped to dry dock. All crews moved about, trying to get seats on Pelicans as they transferred them off to go through security checks and finally to see family. They'd all have to land at assigned bases on Earth while dry dock crews boarded and started repairs.

Seth and Elena packed up their things as they got ready to head down to Earth. Aldric and Sarah were also ready, and were riding with them as Jack was their pilot.

"I hate to ask ma'am, butâ€¦" Jack said from the cockpit.

"You want me to be your co-pilot?" Elena asked with a smirk.

"That would be nice of you ma'am" Jack smiled back.

"Sure thing dad" she giggled as Elena walked up and put the ear mics on. She then took her seat behind him as they carefully maneuvered the Pelican out of the carrier and headed down. From what Aldric had told her, he was going to take Sarah to his home in Seattle. There would be a hopper waiting for them once they got to Vandenberg AFB. The trip down was somewhat cheerful, even though they all remembered the lives lost on Salvation.

As they reached the AFB, the Pelican landed carefully and opened its RORO. Aldric and Sarah said their goodbyes and Sarah said she would like to visit Elena if it was alright with her. Elena immediately agreed, and made sure they had invitations to their wedding. She even decided, right then and there, that Sarah would be one of her bride's maids. Sarah was awe struck, and didn't know what to say. She just nodded as she turned to look at Aldric. He just smiled at her.

"Alright, have a safe trip!" Elena told them as they got on board another transport and flew towards Seattle. The next three hours were involving Elena going through a semi debriefing made suitable for a General. As they finished the debriefing and were cleared to head home, two black SUVs drove up through the gates and stopped in front of them, without markers or license plates.

"Oh hellâ€¦" Seth said in a low voice as he rolled his eyes and looked at Elena.

"What's going on?" she asked confused.

"Agent Franklin" the driver said as multiple men in black suits walked up to him.



"I figured as much" Seth said as he knew what was going to happen.

"We need you to come with us, we need to run security checks on you" the driver said.

"Seth, what's going on? Why do you need to go with them?" Elena asked. Seth sighed.

"Look, I'm sorry, I have to go with them for a bit; because of what I did, they need to know I'm not a security risk with the connection to the shipyard. I was sort of in an alien's head, and they need to know I'm not compromised" he told her. Elena looked among the men who were standing there. All of them showed no emotion, and all wore black sunglasses.

"Can you give me a sec guys?" Seth asked. The driver nodded and they got back to the trucks.

"Hey, I've already got you coded for both homes and the car. Stay at the beach house if you want, it's yours now too remember? Get some sun, go swimming, relax" he stated. She shook her head softly.

"Are you going to be okay? How long is this gonna be?" she asked.

"Until they know I'm not a security risk. It shouldn't be long, I just have to prove I'm fine. Go, go relax and settle in. Get used to being at either one and driving around. Don't worry, I'll be fine" he told her with a small faux smile. She squinted her eyes a little bit and furrowed her eyebrows.

"Alright, ok, umâ€¦ I'll stay at the beach house" she told him. He gave her a quick kiss and hugged her, and then picked up his bags and walked towards the SUVs. One black suited man opened the door.

"I love you" he told her as he turned around.

"I love you too" she yelled out as he got inside the truck. The SUVs turned around and headed back out through the gate. A waiting car was there to pick her up and take her, now with only her father and brother, to San Francisco. She was dropped off and helped to carry her things and any remaining bags Seth didn't take with him, which was almost all of them. As she let the driver get into the car and closed the door, she turned around and looked at the living room. This was her new home, or one of them anyways. Her things were already moved into this house as well as the high rise. Jack and Milo said their goodbyes and gave her a hug before being driven to her mother's house, where Milo's car had been parked the entire time.

Elena took a tentative step forward and sighed. Her stomach growled a little bit, and so she decided to go into the kitchen, her kitchen, to check on the stock. There was very little, as they had been gone for some time and wouldn't have been able to keep any perishables inside.

"Might as well go grocery shopping" she whispered to herself. She grabbed her purse and opened the door to the small garage. The Growler GT was waiting for her, and as she touched the handle, it

opened effortlessly. She slipped in and started the ignition, and the engine roared to life. The garage door opened for her and she backed out and headed to the nearby grocery store.

After she came back and made a sandwich and stocked the refrigerator, she sat down watching some tv. She had been at the house, her house, for a few hours and was already bored. Having the whole place to herself without her fianc  was depressing. She looked up at the clock to see that time was going by agonizingly slow. She decided to call her friends and see if even one of them could talk or come over. All of them were either busy or at work. Even her mother was occupied. She decided to try and do some warm ups for dancing, but stopped halfway. She just wasn't in the mood. She was worried about Seth.

Her final act of getting rid of her boredom was to play any games she found on the computer. Seth had coded her into the terminal as well, and found a year pass for a website to download unlimited games. She slowly got into different first person shooters and flight simulations, but tended to stay away from any sports games. She found a zombie horror game that had just come out, and it passed the time fairly quickly. She realized she had to put it down when the clock showed it was close to midnight. She didn't think she was a hardcore gamer, but the game did eat away at the day.

As she got ready for bed, she realized Seth wasn't coming home tonight. She crawled into bed and turned on the tv one last time to watch a bit of news before slowly falling asleep.

**\*\*[Three days later]\*\***

Elena had called the number that Seth had given her if she needed to reach him. The number went through multiple encrypted channels, and relayed her to a clothing shop, or what said it was a clothing shop. It was a fake obviously, and Elena tried to get through but wasn't having much luck. They kept saying it was a clothing store and that no one named Seth worked there.

As she was about to give up, the line suddenly swapped to a familiar voice.

"Elena? This is Serina" she heard on the other side.

"Hey, Serina, how is Seth doing? Is he coming home soon?" she asked.

"He's in the middle of the debriefing. I can't explain anything beyond that. All I can say is that he's healthy and things are going smoothly" Serina replied.

"Debriefing? What? Wha  ok, uh, is there a time frame I might expect him coming home?" Elena asked.

"It's I don't have a time frame to provide at this moment. The debriefing time is undetermined. I'm sorry" she told her and hung up. Elena looked at the phone and put it down on its pedestal. Just what exactly was happening to him?

**\*\*[1900 hours, August 16\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/ San Francisco]\*\***

Elena had spent the past two days with her parents and friends to pass the time. Amber had talked her ear off while she cooked, and had taken her to her son's baseball game to root him on. Marcus and Jennifer took her with them to a theme park to get her to relax a bit, despite the fact she was on shore leave. She had gained some reports involving the fleet and how it was doing, what little of it there was left to be called a fleet.

As she headed upstairs to go to bed, the front door slowly unlocked and opened. She turned around to see Seth creeping in and closing the door, and he looked exhausted. He turned around and saw her on the stairs looking at him.

"Hey" he said quietly and dropped his one bag on the ground.

"Hey you" she replied back and walked down the stairs again. He gave her a kiss and hugged her close.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get back earlier. The debriefing wasâ€¦ longâ€¦" he told her as he looked away, not meeting her gaze.

"Were they really worried about you beingâ€¦ compromised?" she asked.

"That was only part of itâ€¦ it'sâ€¦ it's involving the Sangheiliâ€¦" he told her. She looked confused.

"Apparently they found out about underground trading of weapons to rebels being done by ONI. We're still trying to figure out just how it got by us, but apparently it happened. The Sangheili may pull out of the Alliance with us. We don't know just yet. They've pulled their fleets back and aren't assisting in anything human related. We're in some deep shit, and my agency is scrambling to figure out how to dig us out" Seth explained quietly.

"Could this mean war?" she asked surprised and very concerned.

"I don't know. It might. If we're lucky, it can be fixed, but it'll take a miracle to get us out of this. ONI really strained relations with them with this debacle" he told her.

"Alrightâ€¦ I guess all fleets will have to be on alertâ€¦ just what we needâ€¦ another enemyâ€¦" Elena grumbled and brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

"Yeahâ€¦ anyways, I hope you're doing ok here. Got settled in?" he asked. She nodded.

"It was a little boring without you here" she told him as she rubbed his shoulder affectionately.

"Yeah, not my fault, trust me. I'll make it up to you, promise" he told.

"Pinkie swear?" she asked with a coy smile.

"Pinkie swear" he replied and put up his pinkie to wrap around hers.

"One other thing" he spoke up quickly as she smiled.

"What's up?" she asked as they walked up the stairs.

"I've been thinking, about the wedding" he told her. She immediately turned around and looked at him confused.

"I think legally I should have my last name changed to yours" he told her. She looked surprised.

"But I thought-" she trailed off.

"Remember the marriage act of 2092? Allowing men to take a woman's surname easily? I talked it over with your mother and father yesterday. They're fine with itâ€¦ are you alright with it?" he asked. She stood there thinking.

"Wellâ€¦ it'sâ€¦ abnormalâ€¦ even todayâ€¦ butâ€¦ are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm sure. Seth Gripen and Elena Gripen. Sound ok? My parents are fine with it as well" he told her.

"Hmâ€¦ Elena Franklinâ€¦ Elena Gripenâ€¦" she said to herself.

"If you don't want to, I'll understand. However, your reputation as a Gripen has grown. To suddenly change to another nameâ€¦ mmm, the Gripen luck could disappearâ€¦ we don't want thatâ€¦" he mocked concern as his eyebrows furrowed.

"Alright! Alright, fine, we'll do it. Seth Gripen. It does sound nice" she giggled out.

"Good. So it's decided" he nodded at her with a smile.

\*\*[1200 hours, May 4\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2555 Military Calendar)/ San Francisco, La Balleza de Dios Chapel]\*\*

"You may now kiss the bride" the priest said. Elena and Seth kissed happily as everyone cheered and clapped. The ceremony was complete as the priest smiled. Amber, Sarah, Aurora, Jennifer and Maria all clapped as the newly weds held each other. Dmitri stood behind Seth as his best man, and Marcus, Andy, Jones and Aldric were groomsmen. Five hundred people were packed into the Chapel. They both turned to their guests as they clapped for them.

The reception was smooth as everyone filed out after the bride and groom walked down the aisle hand in hand with the groomsmen and bride's maids following. There was quite a bit of dancing as Elena had changed out of her wedding gown into a much easier to work with white dress. Even Marcus's young son got to dance with her. She moved far slower with him as he was barely to her chest. During the cutting of the cake, the knife was nowhere to be found.

"Psst, Dmitriâ€¦" Seth whispered as Dmitri looked around.

"Alrightâ€¦ alrightâ€¦" he whispered back as he slid out a large kukri that was hidden on his person and helped cut the cake. Elena was surprised he was carrying it on him during the wedding.

"Agents are always prepared hon" Seth whispered. She let out a chuckle as Dmitri looked embarrassed. Elena fed a bite to her new husband and he did the same as the other pieces were cut out and given to the immediate wedding party while spare cakes were cut for the guests.

After the reception, both Seth and Elena waited at the door of the building as the guests lined up along the walkway to the limo. As they ran down the walkway with rice thrown at them from all directions, Elena couldn't believe how happy she was. She had made it out of two harrowing fights with the Precursors, had become a General, had stopped two major offenses against the galaxy and had finally found true love after so much pain.

They jumped into the limo and closed the door, laughing as the limo slowly pulled out and headed towards the hotel. They waved out the back window as the guests did the same to them.

"Well, Mrs. Gripen, we are off to our honeymoon" Seth told her as he took a more comfortable seat and undid his bow tie.

"That we are Mr. Gripen; that we are. I hope Roost is as beautiful as I remember it. This time I'm not staying in a military base" Elena giggled.

"The GRID base?" he asked. Elena looked at him quizzically.

"The Air Force base there, Gamma 2-1" she told him.

"There's only one base on Roost hon, and it's owned by my agency. We sometimes lease it out for special projects for other branches though" he told her with a small smirk.

"Soâ€¦ I was in aâ€¦ GRID operations base?" she asked wide eyed.

"You didn't noticed theâ€¦ oh, I guess there aren't any symbols around are thereâ€¦ nevermind!" he told her and laughed out loud. She laughed with him.

"Well we aren't staying there. The Briar Hotel thankfully, and I can't wait for my first massage at the spa" she told him.

"Or golfingâ€¦ no screw that, I hate golf. Snorkeling. And there's dancing, and crystal clear waters to swim in, and hikingâ€¦" he thought out loud. She giggled and gave him a long kiss.

"I hope there aren't any large fish in the waterâ€¦ you wouldn't know anything would you?" Seth asked.

"I didn't go swimming much. I'm pretty sure it's fine since it's a resort" she told him with a smile. The limo continued on towards its destination, with its happily married couple carried inside. For once, a time to relax for these two, though other challenges may arise in the future. Only time will tell. The Gripen Legacy is far from over.

**\*\*The End\*\***

(Author's Note: I think someone had once pointed out that I'd do 25 chaptersâ€| twenty four hah!... waitâ€| that's not something to gloat over being under the numberâ€| hey wait again, the twenty fifth last time was the legendaryâ€| ohâ€| uhâ€| heheh, I say nothing! There is no legendary ending! You have not played on Legendary Difficulty with all skulls activated! \*Elena and Seth show score card\* Not a perfect score! You're missing three points! Hah! \*Runs away\* \*Elena and Seth look at Readers and point at Dark Gear\* "Sick em")

(Author's Special Note: Thanks to all readers who reviewed and kept up with the story. It kind of hurts to end this one as it brings this adventure of Elena to a close. My muse is on her honeymoon! Now I have to do other stuff while she has fun and relaxesâ€| without floating around frozen in a cockpit that is. Good, time to relax myself. Still have other ideas though, just don't know if she'll be up for them. Will have to wait and see what the future holds!)

## 25. Legendary

(Author's Note: Grrrâ€| gotta stop making theseâ€| fans and characters beating the crap out of meâ€| twisting my armâ€| the story was fine! I would have gotten away with it if it wasn't for you meddling kids! Blarghâ€| yeah I do wanna see the next adventure tooâ€| ok ok fine! Here it is)

\*\*[LOAD DISC TWO \*There is no Disc Two\* SORRY THENâ€| \*Holds Xbox 360 at gunpoint\* DOWNLOAD COMPLETE, HEHEHâ€| HEHâ€| HEHâ€| FREE GOLD PASS? \*That would be nice\* LEGENDARY ENDING STARTING]\*\*

\*\*[0300 hours, July 4\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2556 (Military Calendar)/ San Francisco General and Trauma Hospital]\*\*

A groan came from inside the delivery room, and then another.

"Ma'am, I need you to push" the nurse requested. Another groan and a whimper from the woman lying in the bed with her feet in the stirrups. She pushed as hard as she could.

"One more. The baby's head is coming out" the nurse said.

"Come on honey, just one more! You can do this!" The father said as he held her hand.

"I can't!" she cried as she winced from the pressure.

"Yes you can, just one more!" the nurse and doctor said. The woman groaned again as she pushed one more time.

"Andâ€| the body is out! Good job! Now one more! Just hang in there!" the doctor said. The woman laid her head down on the pillow and breathed deep.

"You can do this, I know you can. You're the strongest woman I know, this is nothing!" the father said.

"You aren't the one in labor!" she snarled at him, and then moaned from the contractions. She had light pain killers already flowing through her system, for what good they actually did.

"Alright, here comes the next one" the doctor said as he waited for her to push.

"I can't do this" she whimpered to her husband.

"You can. Just push" he responded. The woman took a breath and pushed.

"The head is coming along nicely, one more" the doctor requested. The woman pushed once more, wincing and releasing the breath she had held through gritted teeth. Her hair was caked around her face from sweat.

"One more! Just one more and the baby is out!" the doctor said enthusiastically. The woman looked up and pushed once more with her eyes screwed tight. Her husband stood by her side the entire time holding her hand.

"He's out! The baby is out!" the doctor said as the woman relaxed. The nurses cleaned both infants and wrapped them carefully as they cried, gaining their first breaths.

"Congratulations on having healthy twins; a girl and a boy" the doctor told her. She cried in happiness as they slid the children into her arms, weak as they were from labor. The boy was fairly quiet as he looked at her through half closed eyes, cuddled against his mother. The girl, on the other hand, was crying her head off up until the woman started to coo to her, and then she calmed down almost immediately from the sound of her voice, almost instinctively knowing who she was.

"What do we put down as the names for the delivery?" one nurse asked as she typed away on a data pad. The woman looked at her husband as he leaned near her shoulder on the bed and looked at the children.

"She has your eyes" he told her.

"Yeahâ€¦ and he has your nose" she giggled up to him.

"He better not, it's the worst part of my face" he replied. She laughed as he wiggled his finger near his son's nose.

"So what are their names ma'am?" the nurse asked again. The woman looked up at her husband's eyes, and he nodded in agreement to what they had chosen.

"Alley and Victor Gripen."

**\*\*Grizzly Column\*\***

The Gripen Legacy Continuesâ€¦

End  
file.